The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education

A QQI Evaluation

2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

In response to COVID-19-related social restrictions, further education and training (FET) institutions including community education providers, and higher education (HE) institutions established modified arrangements for teaching, learning and assessment starting in mid-March 2020. Institutions implemented these modifications rapidly on an emergency basis over days to weeks to enable learners where feasible to complete the academic year under the COVID-19 social distancing regime. The special issues faced by apprentices who were furloughed or made redundant is outside the scope of this report.

This report is a high-level preliminary analysis of experiences reported to us in a range of different formats by a wide range of organisations including universities, institutes of technology, education and training boards, private HE institutions, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), AONTAS, AHEAD, and others. Our analysis is broad, and focusses on issues rather than on institutions. In broad terms, we aimed to determine as best we could in the time available and given the available data what was done, what worked well, and what did not work well.

The main objective of this work is to provide an early, authoritative account of the impact of the modified teaching, learning and assessment arrangements. We expect this account will support confidence in qualifications awarded in 2020 and help protect their reputation nationally and internationally.

Chapter 1 explains our motivation for producing this report.

Chapter 2 sets out the further education and training (FET) and higher education (HE) context in Ireland in and around March 2020 when the COVID-19 global pandemic struck.

Chapter 3 provides an illustrative overview of the global response by tertiary education systems to the challenges posed by COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, particularly in relation to the supports put in place by the tertiary education and the quality assurance communities to meet the challenges.

Further education and training

Chapter 4 of the report deals with the further education and training (FET) sector.

The range of provision, services and learner cohorts within the FET sector is broad and diverse. The lockdown occurred towards the end of the academic year for a sizeable proportion of the FET sector. FET providers[1] had covered much of the curriculum by 12 March and learners were focussing mainly on coursework and assessment. Learners working towards terminal qualifications and those seeking to avail of progression opportunities such as CAO (Central Applications Office) offers were a priority. The social inclusion dimension of ETB provision, especially at NFQ Levels 1-4, was another priority where the focus was primarily on maintaining engagement with learners and supporting remote teaching and learning where possible.

The value of peer support was frequently identified in the FET submissions, at both practitioner and provider levels, through sectoral fora such as the Education and Training Board (ETB) Directors of Further Education Forum; the Quality Strategy group; or the Quality Network supported by Education and Training

---

1 Providers of programmes of education and training.

Boards Ireland (ETBI).

The FET quality assurance governance groups (e.g. Quality Councils), FET management groups and quality assurance services provided oversight and guidance for the management of change with the required flexibility. This inspires confidence in the reasonableness of those changes.

Teaching and learning: After the lockdown, teaching and learning continued remotely by email, VLE, digital communications platforms, online video channels, collaborative file-sharing software, telephone calls, text messages and post. Responses from practitioners, AHEAD and AONTAS suggest that some marginalised and vulnerable groups were particularly disadvantaged by the experience of remote teaching and learning.[2]

Practical instruction and 'learning by doing' are defining characteristics of much FET provision and the lack of access to work placements, specialist equipment or facilities was a tough challenge.

Despite the extraordinary efforts of many teaching staff to keep learners engaged, both parties overwhelmingly missed the face-to-face interaction of the physical classroom environment.

Feedback from learners on what worked well during this period consistently commended the availability and responsiveness of teaching staff, the lengths to which practitioners went to keep learners engaged in their learning, and the level of support and flexibility they received.

Learners also identified that remote learning provided greater flexibility and control in how and when they accessed programme material.

Assessment: Several providers reported producing procedures on arrangements for modifications to assessments informed by guidance produced by QQI. One partnered with the Further Education Support Service (FESS) to this end.

Providers also described an element of peer review either by colleagues or external authenticators to quality assure the standard of assessment. Some providers received very positive feedback on arrangements for online external authentication and have indicated that sharing of good practice in this area would be useful.

Learner survey data suggest that the majority of learners felt confident in their ability to complete their assessments and felt that they were fair. Practitioners – particularly at Levels 5-6 – also commented that many of the written assessments and open-book examinations worked well and in several cases the alternative assessment was found to be a better assessment instrument than the original. Both practitioners and learners commented that some learners found the completion of assignments a less stressful experience than an examination.

However, staff also found it challenging to engage learners at NFQ Levels 1-3 in remote assessment and for some cohorts the majority of certification was deferred until the autumn.

Responses from practitioners indicate confidence in the integrity of assessment although some responses indicate a lack of awareness among practitioners of measures to support academic integrity in an online/remote context. A majority of learners felt that the assessment arrangements prevented cheating, but learner survey data also indicate an element of uncertainty on this point. The submissions indicate an awareness that remote/online provision poses new challenges for academic integrity and that practitioners need to be equipped with appropriate technology (e.g. anti-plagiarism software) and

---

2 Evidence suggested that particular learner cohorts (e.g. Travellers, Roma, learners in Direct Provision, and learners with a disability) faced greater challenges in relation to teaching and learning, particularly around areas of access and engagement.

expertise to navigate these challenges with greater confidence and to ensure the continued confidence of all stakeholders in the integrity of awards.

Many practitioners found the arrangements for online submission of assessments and tools for the provision of feedback to be preferable to those previously used and would like to retain these practices.

Providers identified the safe reopening of FET centres including community education as a key challenge for 20/21. While COVID-19 remains a threat, centre capacity will be lower than normal, and providers will have to prioritise access.

A backlog of deferred work experience placements, combined with the potential for ongoing challenges in securing placements, is a concern – particularly for programmes such as traineeships and apprenticeships with large workplace components.

Learner engagement difficulties may be exacerbated if remote teaching and learning extends over a longer period and therefore their causes need to be understood.

The delivery and assessment of practical skills, and provision at Levels 1-3, were two of the major challenges identified by respondents and these are areas in which sectoral collaboration may be of particular benefit in identifying effective responses.

Some practitioners lacked experience in assessment design and online assessment methodologies and would have welcomed more by way of guidance and examples. Also, as blended teaching and learning is likely to be an ongoing feature of FET provision, providers have indicated that professional development for practitioners is required to enhance capacity.

The sharing of practice and the development of case studies and exemplars across communities of practice, providers, and on a sectoral basis will continue to help reduce the 'trial and error' nature of some of the COVID response and provide greater confidence to providers and practitioners in more effective approaches and methodologies.

Higher education

Chapters 5 to 9 of the report deal with the higher education sector. The higher education sector comprises the institutes of technology (currently 11, all members of THEA); Technological University Dublin (the only TU in Ireland at the time of writing); RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences; the seven universities in the IUA and the National University of Ireland, and their linked colleges, and the independent higher education institutions.

The findings in this summary are based mainly on responses (received by 24 July 2020) from seven universities, nine institutes of technology, the RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences and Technological University Dublin. Our independent HE findings are reported in **Chapter 8.**

In-person teaching and learning activity ceased in mid-March 2020. Institutions quickly reconfigured to complete the academic year online with staff and students dispersed – most working from home and some students in other countries – and remote interactions between people were mediated by information and communications technology. Education, research and related services for students and staff were all affected. The change management process used to make this transition demonstrated significant leadership qualities at all levels within institutions. The main goals were to:

- protect the health and welfare of students, staff, and the wider community

- enable students to graduate or accumulate as much as possible of their scheduled academic credit in a timeframe as close as possible to normal
- preserve academic integrity.

Teaching and learning: All institutions sought to continue programmes where at all feasible. Mass deferral was not a practicable option because many higher education systems were operating at capacity before the crisis.

Institutions primarily used their existing management and quality assurance infrastructure to govern change management. Considering what was achieved in such a short time, we were impressed by the success of higher education institutions at finishing out the academic year under the COVID-19 restrictions within the normal timescale and completing the groundwork for next year. The quality assurance infrastructure established by institutions proved to be crucial in approaches to change management, which inspires confidence in the reasonableness of those changes.

The principle of the conservation of essential learning outcomes helped focus minds on what needed to be done rather than what could no longer be done. Time invested by the institutions in the elaboration of intended programme and module learning outcomes over the past 20 years stood them in good stead during this emergency.

Institutions strove to provide learners with opportunities to achieve the originally intended module, stage, or programme learning outcomes[3]. In some cases, e.g. work-based learning, this was impossible, and the choice was either to defer or to supplement with the best approximation.

Information technology infrastructure was critically important in enabling the rapid change. Without it, almost everything would have ground to a virtual halt. However, resource problems e.g. access to reliable broadband or suitable devices made remote access a challenge for some students and staff.

An effective strategy for communicating with (remote) students (including international and exchange students) and staff was critical for managing the change process and for providing continuity of higher education, research and related services.

It was helpful that institutions had been making increasing use of blended[4] teaching and learning approaches. This meant that all institutions had a core of staff who were available to help support the transition to remote teaching, learning and assessment. However, understandably, many staff and students were not prepared for the abrupt transition to remote teaching and learning.

It was clear from the responses that the institutes of technology and universities are relatively cohesive groups regularly cooperating with one another at different levels. THEA (the Technological Higher Education Association) played a key role in facilitating cooperation among the institutes of technology – brokering agreements, constructively representing the institutes' interests to key stakeholders and facilitating effective communication. Meetings of the IOT Council of Registrars and other THEA network groups were held as frequently as necessary during the crisis. Similarly, the IUA played a key role in representing the interests of the universities and facilitating cooperation and effective communication between them on a range of fronts, including at President/Provost and IUA Registrars/VP Academic Affairs meetings which were held as frequently as necessary during the crisis.

The COVID-19 emergency disrupted research students to varying degrees. However, supervision continued remotely, and institutions continued to pay research stipends. **Chapter 7** covers the impact

---

3 The term 'learning outcomes' was not explicitly addressed in all responses though.
4 Blended teaching and learning means using a mixture of face-to-face and online tuition in the same course.

on research and research degree programmes in detail.

From a teaching and learning perspective international and exchange students required additional consideration. COVID-19 led to some students returning to their countries of origin to complete the academic year online. For some, differences in time zones complicated participation in any synchronous activities. Some returned to countries that implement internet censorship. Arrangements for exchange students were also potentially more complicated depending on the situation.

While the achievements of the higher education sector are impressive as is the level of positivity of many students about their experience (**Chapter 6**), there were notable challenges to be faced and some level of dissatisfaction. Challenges arose for some in following areas: the quality of technology-mediated interactions between people; other limitations of available educational technology; adapting pedagogy at short notice; restricted activities; the changes to the learning environment from a student perspective; staff workload; delays in securing professional recognition body approvals in some cases; library, copyright and data issues; issues arising from individual circumstances.

Many students were positive about the efforts made by their institutions. In some cases, this experience revealed better ways of doing things. It has given some staff an opportunity to try out online learning approaches for the first time and become acquainted with its possibilities.

The emergency transition to remote teaching and learning was not a conclusive test of what can be achieved by online approaches to teaching and learning. Nevertheless, it may have opened eyes to new possibilities and challenged the necessity of some ingrained practices that may have been considered sacrosanct until COVID-19 struck.

This report provides preliminary findings based on responses from institutions including surveys of students and staff. A comprehensive determination of how teaching and learning were impacted would be difficult, and it is yet too early for that. For now, it can be said that in the circumstances the teaching in second semester seems to have gone reasonably well in that higher education programmes have generally not been delayed (with some exceptions) or completely derailed.

Assessment: Unseen written examinations normally conducted in examination halls under strict invigilation are a mainstay for summative assessment in higher education and were all cancelled from mid-March 2020. Institutions had to find alternative arrangements for assessing students for eligibility for graduation or to progress to the next stages of their programmes. Three overarching principles guided the majority of providers and the development of their alternative proposals:

- designing alternative assessment methodologies to examinations that appropriately assess programme, stage or module learning outcomes
- protecting the academic integrity of qualification-awarding processes
- ensuring that students were not 'disadvantaged'[5] by the alternative modes of assessment.

In March 2020 there were calls from some quarters for 'no detriment' approaches to assessment, some of which would have been problematic as they sought to guarantee a prior grade average held by the student regardless of the assessment that was to follow. USI excelled in terms of the leadership position it took in this debate and the sensible approach it promoted. The nucleus of USI's approach was

> *"A core consideration for SUs to work with their institutions on is that all circumstances that may affect student performance in assessment are taken into account at the appropriate board (ordinarily examinations board or equivalent) and in doing this, this is taken into account on a wider programme*

---

5 'Disadvantage' here is a term of art that is addressed in **Chapter 5**.

*level rather than examining this on a module-by-module basis. It might be helpful for Guidelines for
Examinations Boards to be produced in support of this principle."[6]*

Institutions found various alternatives to invigilated in-person written exams for assessing learners'
achievement of intended learning outcomes (ILOs) including the use of one or more of the following:

- continuous assessment
- non-proctored online[7] examinations with a long time-window
- non-proctored online examinations with a short time-window
- proctored[8] online examinations.

Non-proctored exams were typically 'open-book'.

We include, in **Chapter 5**, an outline of the various kinds of approaches institutions took to modifying
their arrangements for assessment. We group the approach-elements under the following headings:
assessment policy, principles and oversight; communication about assessment; assessment support
for students; assessment support for staff; the development of assessment modifications; the
implementation of modified assessments; academic integrity; external examining and examination
boards and assessment of candidates for research degrees.

We do not yet have sufficient information on outcomes (e.g. results) to analyse or draw conclusions.
However, during our quality dialogue meetings, the institutions indicated that an initial analysis of the
assessment results and overall grades yielded no remarkable findings in comparison with previous years.

Naturally there were challenges for institutions, students and staff in making the emergency transition
to remote-only assessment. Some challenges echoed those encountered in teaching and learning.

The timescale for the completion of examinations was broadly similar to normal. This led to a
substantial increase in the workload of all staff involved in making alternative arrangements.

Non-proctored open-book examinations were more susceptible to cheating than the proctored unseen
written examinations that they sometimes replaced. Contract cheating can be difficult to detect. This
situation provided an opportunity for institutions to place an increased emphasis on advising students
to be aware of approaches from essay mills and of the risks for anybody who engages with them. The
assessment of coursework is also susceptible to cheating, but this is not new.

Designing open book-examinations to replace invigilated unseen written examinations is challenging for
the academic developing the test, especially if they are new to this type of examination. Similarly, it can
be more challenging for students to sit an examination with an unfamiliar format.

The early indications are that things went reasonably well considering the circumstances. The crisis
stimulated assessment innovation. Some assessors "observed instances of deeper learning from their
students". External examining worked well online. The learning outcomes approach helped.

The assumed heightened risk to academic integrity due to the replacement of invigilated in-person
examinations with non-proctored online examinations or increased continuous assessment will
require continued vigilance in 20/21 and some more robust ways of remotely assessing but we cannot
yet quantify the change in risk. We have described the strategies that institutions have used to draw
students' attention to the expectations regarding academic integrity. In their communications to

---

6 https://usi.ie/education/statement-on-student-concerns-regarding-assessment/

7 Here we mean the examination is delivered online and the student submissions are collected online.

8 Invigilated is an alternative term that is widely used in Ireland.

students they draw students' attention to codes of academic conduct (e.g. honour codes) and they require students to sign integrity declarations when taking non-proctored examinations.

Chapter 6 presents a secondary analysis of national surveys of HE students, particularly the Union of Students of Ireland survey.

While many students were satisfied or at least neutral there were some students who were dissatisfied with various aspects of how things were handled. Some of this is inevitable e.g. dissatisfaction about the loss of things precluded by the COVID-19 realities, but not all of it is like that and we need to understand what can be done to enhance the response for 20/21.

Further studies will clearly be required to fully understand the implications of COVID-19 in 2020 and the consequences for students, staff, programmes, professions and institutions.

On the basis of the responses we have received, and our knowledge of the higher education sector, we are confident that higher education institutions will continue to respond to the many challenges and adapt their practices reflectively to provide high quality programmes and credible academic qualifications during the COVID-19 crisis.

Conclusion

Social distancing will continue to constrain tertiary education teaching, learning and assessment modalities in 20/21. People are learning to adapt to COVID-19, but it is highly contagious, and its exponential growth potential is ruthless. On-campus capacity will be reduced while COVID-19 remains a threat and some kinds of work placements may also be more difficult to secure. The risk of reescalation of social distancing restrictions remains.

Choosing how to use onsite activity to best effect will be critical. The induction of new students and returning progressing students will need to be a priority as will access to specialist facilities and equipment.

Enhancing remote and blended/hybrid teaching, learning and assessment will be an ongoing priority for institutions as will the need for online delivery of academic and professional support, care and guidance services to students and staff. The institutional effort and resources required to establish a planned blended format for all 20/21 programmes are significant.

The short timeframe of this study means that we do not know how sustainable some of the emergency measures are and whether fatigue might increase if these measures were to be implemented over a longer time span.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Contents

1 Preliminaries

QQI (**Quality and Qualifications Ireland**) is an independent State agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland. We were established in November 2012.

2 What prompted this report?

In response to COVID-19 related social restrictions, institutions of further education and training (FET) and higher education (HE) established modified arrangements for teaching, learning and assessment starting around March 2020. Institutions implemented these modifications rapidly on an emergency basis over days to weeks to enable learners[1] where feasible to complete the academic year under the COVID-19 social distancing regime.

This report is a preliminary high-level analysis of experiences reported to us by FET and HE institutions and other key stakeholders. Our approach is broad. We do not compare the responses of individual institutions. Quotations from the responses are anonymised.

The report presents a preliminary analysis of diverse material provided by many entities. It provides timely information. The few weeks we had available to process this material did not allow us to do full justice to the rich information that was received.

Our mandate for doing this work comes from the Quality Integrity and Reputation (QIR) Group[2] that the Department of Education and Skills established as part of its response to the COVID-19 emergency. Specifically, the QIR Group approved the QQI project entitled *"An Evaluation of the Impact of the COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment"*. We shall refer to this as the TLA project in this report. QQI is uniquely placed to lead this work owing to its role as the national external quality assurance agency for FET and HE and the national qualifications authority.

Considering the membership of the QIR group, its decision to launch this project, and the engagement of stakeholders with this process, it is clear that the core stakeholders in the tertiary education system are keenly interested in this topic.

English Language Education and Apprenticeship fall outside the scope of this project for certain technical reasons.

3 What is this report about?

This early-stage preliminary report contextualises and outlines how further education and higher education institutions responded to COVID-19 in March-June 2020, the challenges that they, their students and their staff faced, the things that worked well and the perceptions of institutions, their students and their staff on the impact of the changes.

---

1 We use the term learner to represent a person enrolled or aspiring to enrol in a process by which that person may acquire knowledge, skill or competence. That process may be, for example, a programme of education and training, a course of study, a course of instruction, an apprenticeship, a traineeship, a research degree programme. We normally use the more traditional term student to mean a learner in the context of higher education.

2 At the time of writing this group is still active and is chaired by the chief executive of QQI. The group includes representatives of key stakeholders in FET and HE. The composition and TOR for this group are set out in the Annexe.

4 What are we trying to achieve by doing this work?

The main objective for doing this work is to provide an early, authoritative account of the impact of COVID-19 on teaching, learning and assessment in FET and HE.

We hope the findings will help identify opportunities for improvement that will be of interest not least because social distancing measures will continue to be required during the 20/21 academic year.

We also hope the findings reported here will support confidence in qualifications awarded in 2020 and protect their reputation nationally and internationally.

5 In broad terms how did we approach the work?

The specification for the "TLA project" that was agreed with the QIR group presented the scope of the project, along with indicative questions and an outline of the kind of data we wished to receive from participating organisations.

In consultation with stakeholders during the development of the TLA project, we decided that QQI would not commission any new surveys but would instead rely on data gathered by participating organisations primarily for their own purposes. We did this to minimise additional work for institutions and to avoid interfering with their own survey and data collection activities. Nevertheless, in some cases, the QQI TLA project specification influenced these data gathering exercises. The decision to admit a broad range of data structures complicated the analysis.

Information was made available to QQI by a wide range of organisations including universities, institutes of technology, education and training boards, private HE institutions, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), AONTAS, AHEAD, and others. The Annexe lists the respondents to our call for information.

In broad terms, the preliminary analysis aimed to determine, as best we could in the time available given the available data:

- what was done,
- what worked well and
- what did not.

We conducted a mixed qualitative and quantitative analysis of data.

Given the volume of data to be analysed, the qualitative data was coded using an essentially predetermined codebook using qualitative data analysis software.

The qualitative analysis aimed to compress the data and bring out the main messages contained using quotations to exemplify.

When looking at survey findings with high satisfaction to dissatisfaction ratios we need to acknowledge the positives, but we must also try to understand the causes of the dissatisfaction because that may help determine what might be done to reduce it.

6 What is our conceptual framework for the work?

Our focus is on the impact on teaching, learning and assessment. Our understanding of these and related terms is outlined in the glossary in the Annexe.

For the purpose of this report when we refer to assessment we normally mean assessment for the purpose of determining eligibility to graduate, earn academic credit or progress to the next stage of a programme of education and training (e.g. an honours bachelor degree course).

7 How is the report structured?

Chapter 1 introduces us, explains our motivation to produce this report and outlines how we approached the evaluation.

Chapter 2 sets out the context for further education and training (FET) and higher education (HE) in Ireland in and around March 2020 when the COVID-19 global pandemic hit home.

Chapter 3 provides an illustrative overview of the global response by tertiary education systems to the challenges posed by COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, particularly in relation to the supports put in place by the tertiary education and the quality assurance communities to meet the challenges.

Chapter 4 presents our findings on the impact on COVID-19 on teaching, learning and assessment in the further education and training system.

Chapters 5-9 presents our findings on the impact on COVID-19 on teaching, learning and assessment in the higher education and training system. Chapter 5 covers the publicly funded higher education sector. Chapter 6 presents a secondary analysis of survey data made available to us by USI and survey information from AHEAD. Chapter 7 covers higher education research. Chapter 8 covers the independent private higher education sector. And Chapter 9 Covers HEAnet.

Chapter 10 presents broad reflections.

The Annexe includes acknowledgements, lists of abbreviations, and a short glossary of some technical terms that are frequently used.

CHAPTER 2: THE IRISH CONTEXT

Contents

1 Introduction

This chapter sets out the context for further education and training (FET) and higher education (HE) in Ireland in and around March 2020 when the COVID-19 global pandemic struck. This chapter draws from the following sources:

- reports and papers provided by national agencies and representative bodies to the Department of Education and Skills COVID-19 **Steering Group** for the tertiary education system and associated coordinating groups and working groups and the minutes of all these group meetings
- updates provided by various national agencies and bodies such as the NFETL (the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning), and by stakeholder representative bodies such as USI, ETBI, THEA, and IUA and by providers of education and training directly to the Department of Education and Skills or to QQI
- bilateral meetings between QQI and the various national agencies, bodies, and other core stakeholders with an interest in education, training or the associated standards and qualifications
- Quality Dialogue Meetings[1] between QQI and some of the autonomous higher education institutions (providers) that it quality assures including the public universities, RCSI (University of Medicine and Health Sciences), the institutes of technology (IoTs) and TU Dublin (currently the only technological university but it will be joined by the new Munster Technological University on 1 January 2021)
- engagements with providers of further and higher education whose programmes QQI validates and whose graduates receive QQI awards (qualifications)
- seminars, bilateral meetings, and surveys of the professional recognition bodies.

For our international readers – In Ireland, the further education and training sector comprises the 16 public education and training boards with responsibility for the delivery of primary, post-primary and further education – in association with private FE providers and Community education providers. The higher education sector includes 7 universities in the IUA and 5 colleges of education; 11 institutes of technology; the Technological University of Dublin; the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland University of Medicine and Health Sciences; the National University of Ireland; and there are currently 31 independent private higher education institutions (termed independent providers) that provide programmes leading to awards made by QQI. Ireland has a well-established National Framework of Qualifications with 10 levels.

This chapter outlines the high-level state of play in further education and training and higher education around the time COVID-19 struck. It outlines:

- the immediate issues faced by providers when the global pandemic struck
- the kinds of collaboration and mutual support that helped organisations respond to the emergency
- the role of the Department of Education and Skills in helping to bring key stakeholders together to facilitate coordination of, and sharing information about, their activities
- the different layers of action initiated and supports put in place by the representative bodies, QQI, professional bodies, from March 2020
- how stakeholders worked together to support and provide leadership for further education and training (FET) and higher education (HE) institutions in the collective effort to maintain educational quality, academic integrity and standards of qualifications as best they could during this time of unprecedented challenge.

---

1 Quality Dialogue Meetings take place between QQI and the large public HE institutions (universities, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland University of Medicine and Health Sciences, and TU Dublin and institutes of technology (IoTs)) and more recently with the public FET colleges – education and training boards (ETBs). They form part of the external QA framework in Ireland. These dialogue meetings provide an opportunity for senior QQI staff and senior teams from the HEIs (including Presidents) and ETBs (including Chief Executives) to consider a range of issues relating to the development, maintenance and enhancement of the respective QA infrastructure. Dialogue meetings take place every one or two years.

2 Setting the Scene

QQI's recently published *Green Paper on The Qualifications System* described the high-level state of play in the tertiary[2] education system:

- Ireland has bounced back relatively recently to virtually full employment after a period of high unemployment following the global financial crisis and now faces the challenge of dealing with the consequences of COVID-19.
- while the most recent (2018) national employer survey[3] found that overall satisfaction with higher and further education graduates was 86% and 84% respectively, there are opportunities for improvement (e.g. commercial awareness, entrepreneurship).
- people are already talking about the accelerating pace of change and the 'fourth industrial revolution'.[4]
- in further education and training (FET)[5], for example, we have seen:
  » major structural changes in educational institutions (ETBs) and regulatory institutions (SOLAS and QQI) in recent years;
  » a renewed interest in workplace learning and an increase in employment-oriented initial and continuing education;
  » the publication of a new five-year Further Education and Training Strategy (FET) 2020-2024.
- in higher education, for example, we have seen:
  » the institutes of technology gain intrinsic awarding powers to make awards at NFQ levels 1-9[6] on 1 January 2020 and become **designated awarding bodies** (DAB) as are Irish universities already;
  » the emergence of technological universities;
  » the beginning of the reform[7] of the Higher Education Authority (HEA) Act 1971;
  » the introduction of apprenticeships leading to higher education qualifications up to doctoral level.
- there is a renaissance of apprenticeships across the tertiary education system (at NFQ levels 5-10) and renewed interest more generally in workplace learning and increasing employment-oriented initial and continuing education.
- the learner population, especially in higher education, is playing a greater role in assisting with quality assurance of educational programmes (courses) and institutions.
- there is considerable interest in attracting international students and new legislation has been enacted for the International Education Mark (IEM), to be implemented by QQI.
- the advancing European qualifications and quality assurance agenda and infrastructure.
- Brexit and its impact on Ireland's qualifications system.

This description of the status quo at the point of impact of COVID-19 unpacks to emphasise the new and evolving provider governance and quality assurance structures (that were well-tested during the crisis); the actual and potential relationships between the workplace, professions, practitioners and

---

2 Tertiary education is sometimes used to refer to further education and training (FET), higher education (HE) and professional education and training that may lead to qualifications from level 1 to level 10 in the NFQ.

3 https://hea.ie/2019/01/23/minister-launches-results-of-national-survey-2018/ (The National Employer Survey is a joint project undertaken by the Higher Education Authority, Quality and Qualifications Ireland and SOLAS)

4 The most requested skill in Irish job vacancy advertisements is "adapt to change".
   https://skillspanorama.cedefop.europa.eu/en/indicators/skills-online-vacancies

5 We will sometimes drop the term training. However, the terms further/higher education should be understood to include both education and training.

6 The 2019 Amendment Act renders them designated awarding bodies but permits them only "to make awards, with the exception of doctoral degrees, to students where the college has satisfied itself that the students have acquired and demonstrated the appropriate standard of knowledge, skill or competence for awards that are included within the National Framework of Qualifications".

7 https://www.education.ie/en/The-Education-System/Higher-Education/Legislative-Proposals-Reform-of-HEA-Act-1971.pdf

education in the context of the qualifications system for lifelong learning. The Green Paper reminds stakeholders that Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications and associated infrastructure, with its emphasis on learning outcomes, functions as a significant organising feature for the exchange of credible information about qualifications — about what they represent and about qualifications needs — what standards of knowledge, skill or competence are needed by employers, professions, practitioners and society more generally.

The following statement captures the essence of the Irish context:

> *The education and training community in Ireland and across the world is united in facing an unprecedented global public health challenge. This poses a clear threat to human life and has fundamentally disrupted all social routine. Leaders in every institution are prioritising the health and well-being of their students and staff working through the advice of Government and health officials. The effects are already being felt and it is not yet known how long this challenge will last. (QQI Confidence statement May 2020.)*

3 FET and HE Institutions

3.1 Timelines

Providers of further education and training, higher education and English language education recognise **12 March 2020** as the date when campus life and other educational and research activities including international and Erasmus arrangements were all disrupted. The level of disruption varied across the system. Providers had a weekend to deliver virtual colleges.

The week following 12 March involved an unprecedented emergency transition by all providers to establish emergency arrangements to enable teaching, training, learning, assessment and associated student and staff engagements and supports to continue insofar as possible while strictly adhering to COVID-19 social distancing requirements. Providers and their students were at varying states of readiness for the 'pivot':

- health, safety, and the welfare of all was the top priority
- some providers had already begun putting learning supports in place early in March in anticipation of campus closures
- some providers indicated that they transitioned activities online during the weekend following 12 March
- the impact on programmes varied across institutions and disciplines or fields of education
- teaching, learning and assessment in the context of professional and clinical placements, other work placements, apprenticeships, traineeships, practical and research projects using specialised equipment or facilities, public performances, public exhibitions were especially challenging, and some of this had to be deferred because no suitable alternatives could be found
- managing the emergency required effective communication in an evolving crisis.

> *Top concerns were all about safety and welfare of our staff and students then getting the communications flow right which is more difficult in a time of crisis. (A University QQI Dialogue)*

A common reaction on reflection is that the timing was fortunate for most institutions. Teaching for many FET programmes had finished or almost finished by 12 March. In HE, the bulk of the teaching for the 2019/2020 academic year had been completed by 12 March (with about a month of the second semester remaining).

Following the statement by An Taoiseach on **17 March 2020**, it was confirmed that providers were not in a position to resume normal on-campus activities and that all teaching, learning and assessment/ examination activities would have to be conducted remotely for the remainder of the academic year. As government advice evolved, a list of essential services was published on **28 March 2020** from which education was excluded and access to all non-classroom campus and college facilities and movement was further curtailed which had an impact for example on physical workspaces for both academic and vocational teaching and learning. These included laboratories, art and performance spaces and workspaces used by research students for live experimental work with specimens at time-critical points.

3.2 Initial conditions

The safety and well-being of the college community was a priority. Communicating the alternative arrangements or cessation of all activities was a secondary priority. (A University QQI Dialogue).

Details about the different kinds of approaches taken by providers will be outlined in later chapters. Here we outline some of the main priorities that quickly emerged:

- prioritise the safeguarding of students, staff and the population in general from COVID-19 including international students on Irish campuses and Erasmus+ students needing to return home
- complete 2019/2020 programmes (teaching, learning and assessment) where at all possible in a period as close to the original timescale as possible rather than defer them
- establish online connections with students, staff and collaborators to create a functioning cyberspace campus[8]
- prioritise those who are due to graduate in 2019/2020
- preserve the value of 2019/2020 qualifications.

"The overriding concerns have been to ensure that students are not disadvantaged at the point of assessment, while working to preserve the academic integrity and standards of all awards." (THEA on behalf of IoTs).

Typically, this required that teaching and learning processes were modified where incompatible with public health guidance. The following are further examples of things that required modification:

- communications strategy
- academic governance and quality assurance processes
- academic management systems including processes, meetings and decision making
- programmes and module learning outcomes (e.g. prioritising the essential LOs)
- pedagogical approaches
- technology and ICT strategy
- communication channels between lecturers and their students (for questions from students and feedback to them)
- student engagement strategies (engaging with students and helping to promote engagement by students)
- student monitoring strategies
- mechanisms for distributing and collecting coursework
- practical learning activities including placements, apprenticeships
- professional body requirements (by mutual agreement, where possible)

---

8 For teaching, learning, assessment, research, library services, ICT services, other professional services for the care, guidance and support of students and staff, operations, management, communications, leadership, governance etc. as applicable

- library and information and database access services
- group activities and services provided to the community
- academic and technical support for students
- staff development and support in remote delivery of academic and professional services
- care and guidance for students and staff
- health and safety, physical campus and accommodation requirements
- feasibility of continuing business engagements – award/prize ceremonies/travel to and from seminars, conferences and hosting of same, commencements, graduations, internal/external reviews/evaluations, and much more
- programme access and progression criteria for 2020/21
- financial implications.

Arrangements for assessment also required modification. We will address change management for adapting teaching, learning and assessment in more detail in later chapters.

Significant additional complexities arose where international students or exchange students were affected. Some international students returned to their home country and needed financial support and ongoing academic support – sometimes without a Wi-Fi connection. The return of some domestic students studying abroad under Erasmus+ was also a concern. Significant levels of support were provided by host institutions to international students who remained in Ireland.

"Last year, the European Migration Network reported a 45% jump in the number of non-EEA students in Ireland compared to five years ago. This set a record for international student enrollment in the country. Nearly 18,500 non-EEA students were enrolled in post-secondary studies in Ireland during the 2018/19 academic year. There were also 5,000 full-time students from within the EU that same year." Independent News for international students, July 2020. (https://www.studyinternational.com/news/study-in-ireland-covid19/)

In general terms Ireland received positive recognition from international peers on its holistic treatment of international students during the COVID-19 crisis. A recent analysis commissioned by the Australian federal government and published by The Age and Sydney Morning Herald listed Ireland among countries that have "provided much more support to international students during the coronavirus pandemic than Australia"." The PIE NEWS 6 May 2020 https://thepienews.com/analysis/aiming-for-excellence-in-a-time-of-crisis-for-international-education-ireland/. Not all student experiences were with regulated providers and some international students did encounter problems.

3.3 Initial communications: striking the right balance

Providers initially put in place extensive reactive and proactive communication processes for keeping connected with their key stakeholder groups.

All providers sought to ensure availability of clear, accurate information to their key stakeholders, especially their students and staff both in Ireland and abroad, about their response to the evolving emergency. In the initial stages, updates were issued daily by some.

Providers also needed to manage communication with the media, government departments, funding agencies, QQI, professional recognition bodies, external examiners/authenticators, international collaborators, partner institutions, research institutions and associations, employers and many others.

Central monitoring of social media platforms was a mechanism used by some to help pick up on any issues arising with learners and staff.

Both provider and learner feedback acknowledged that not all communication got off to a good start.

We will address communications in more detail in later chapters.

4 National-Level Strategic Support, Engagement, and Collaboration

4.1 National coordination

The Department of Education and Skills quickly established a set of groups in March to support the continuity of FET and HE and English language education and related activity through the COVID-19 crisis and beyond. A Tertiary Education System (TES) *Steering Group* coordinated the working groups. Among its terms of reference is: *act as a clearing house for issues emerging for the TES[9] sector as it anticipates and responds to challenges and changes arising from the COVID-19 pandemic*. Its membership includes representatives of key stakeholders in FET and HE. The many valuable reports generated by this group and its associated working groups and their members have informed our report.

The *Quality, Integrity and Reputation (QIR) Group* was the main group presiding over the steering of this QQI-led evaluation[10] (the project) and the production of this report. Chaired by the Chief Executive of QQI, the QIR group aimed to ensure the maintenance of the quality of teaching and learning, assessment, and standards of qualifications by documenting best practice, developing guidelines for the sector, and engaging with other regulators and with professions. Communications with learners remains a core focus of this national group.

During April and May QQI met with 14 national bodies, including student representative organisations, provider representative bodies (IUA, THEA, ETBI, HECA) social partners and government officials. In addition, QQI met with the universities, RCSI, TU Dublin, the Council of Registrars for the institutes of technology, private independent providers, FET directors from the education and training boards (ETBs), other FE and HE providers, student engagement services (NStEP), NFETL (The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning), and other organisations, to establish the parameters for this project. SOLAS and the HEA provided close support for the project as did the learner representative organisations USI and AONTAS who would later undertake focused surveys that informed this report. Some organisations also supported the project with existing data, while others provided reports and information such as AHEAD and HEAnet.

When approached by QQI to undertake this brief reflective project, providers, their staff management and students were already under considerable pressure to manage out the remainder of the courses and programmes, deal with the modified assessment phase, plan for a full new year of organised remote or blended/hybrid provision and recover any outstanding issues, for example on placements and other gaps. Although all providers wanted to

- learn from the emergency arrangements in place since March
- recognise the excellent creative approaches, goodwill and effort initiated across the system
- avoid the many pitfalls that come with emergency provisions
- demonstrate how they supported their students and learners and protected the integrity and reputation of their awards and standards of their qualifications

the capacity to engage with this project and survey their own staff and students who remain under pressure, for immediate reflections and learning, was a significant ask by QQI at a most difficult time for all.

---

9 TES: Tertiary education system.

10 The emphasis on national and international reputation is underscored by this collaborative project, supported by providers and national bodies, to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 modifications on teaching, learning and assessment.

"QQI recognises that it will take many years before the full impact of change experienced during this time will be fully realised by all, both positive and negative, but, nevertheless, the commitment shown to this limited reflective project is a fitting testament to the integrity and reputation that underlies the Irish education and training system." (QQI CEO)

The other national level groups established by the Department of Education and Skills and referred to above include:

- the *Immediate Operations Co-ordination* and *Medium-Term Contingency Planning* groups looking at immediate challenges for the last academic year and developing plans and solutions for transitioning from lockdown into a new academic phase
- the *Mitigating Educational Disadvantage* group continues to examine factors which impact on equity of access, disadvantaged learners, ensuring these inform planning for the sector and proposing responses to mitigate these impacts
- the *English Language Education* working group focussed on the issues faced by international students
- the *Apprenticeship* group engaged with employers to evaluate how COVID-19 and labour market changes, now and into the future, affect apprenticeships. The continuity of apprenticeships, managing the fallout of redundancies, and planning for a lifting of restrictions have been pillars of this group's work
- the *Finance* working group which seeks to identify, track and monitor the financial impacts of COVID-19
- the *International Education* working group seeking to ensure Ireland's international competitiveness in this space and to take the actions necessary to support EU and other mobility programmes such as Erasmus+
- the *Connectivity Working Group* which continues to identify connectivity challenges and develop solutions in relation to broadband, data, networks and devices.

The Steering Committee also engaged on practical issues, for example with the major telecom and network service providers and suppliers of ICT devices toward delivering additional supports, lifting data caps, extending the spectrum, supplying essential learning resources, or providing devices.

4.2 Guidance and collaboration

Members of the FET and HET education and training community shared significant resources with each other especially within the subsystems comprised respectively of education and training boards (ETBs); institutes of technology (IoTs); universities and independent HE providers. Collaboration within and between these subsystems was facilitated by their representative bodies, respectively ETBI, THEA, and the IUA and HECA. Collaboration included regular meetings of groups of senior staff (e.g. registrars of the IoTs; registrars/ Vice-Presidents Academic of universities, deans of graduate studies; Teaching and Learning staff; deans of research; and FET directors and many more), and in the sharing of information, data, examples of effective practice and problem-solving on a daily and weekly basis across a wide range of topics. IUA, THEA and ETBI and HECA continue to work together and with their constituencies and students and their representatives.

4.2.1 QQI statements and guidance to providers

QQI operates across all these subsystems and engages frequently with other state agencies and representative bodies involved with the tertiary education system.

At the time of writing QQI is overseen and supported by the new *Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science* and up until late June it was overseen and supported by the *Department of Education and Skills.*

During the crisis QQI has worked closely with all[11] FET and HE provider groups e.g.:

* the education and training boards both as their main awarding body and as their external quality assurance agency
* designated awarding bodies (universities, IoTs, RCSI and TU Dublin) connecting directly on specific issues and with senior teams in the context of a series of *quality dialogue meeting*s
* the private or independent providers (FET and HE) both as their awarding body and as their external quality assurance agency.

IUA, THEA, and QQI collaborated closely to address issues with professional statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) and other HE contingencies and requirements. QQI worked with as many PSRBs as possible directly on modified arrangements made and flexibility agreed with the HE providers.

In the development of alternative assessment arrangements all education and training providers and student representative organisations contributed to the agreement of national principles (providers through the IUA, THEA and ETBI, HECA and also directly in the case of RCSI and TU Dublin).

Students are an influential group in Ireland's education system and a force for enhancement. AONTAS, AHEAD and USI, for example, represent the views of groups of learners, collaborate with other stakeholders and are represented on key committees and boards. NStEP, in partnership with HEA and QQI, is also closely connected with student engagement issues across HE institutions and the StudentSurvey.ie (Irish Survey for Student Engagement) national project is collaborating with QQI, USI and providers on a number of initiatives including the impact of student feedback. In the feedback for this report some HE providers remarked on the value and benefit of the student survey feedback information received and analysed on undergraduate students from surveys in previous years, and more recently including research students.

As the national qualifications and quality assurance authority for FET and HE, QQI published two documents on addressing the COVID-19 challenge.

* Building Confidence: Supports and Arrangements for the Tertiary Education System

National level guidance was developed on alternative assessment arrangements, including additional guiding principles at a national level with system wide contributions.

* QQI Principles for Alternative Assessments
* Sources to provide information and support to Tertiary Education Providers and Students in the COVID-19 crisis

The renewed emphasis on the statutory QA guidelines on blended learning requirements was also timely.

* QQI Guidelines on Blended Learning

---

11 Please bear in mind that this report does not address QQI activities relating to ELE or Apprenticeship.

4.2.2 Other guidance for providers and learners

Many actors supported FET and HE providers by publishing specialised guidance on how to cope with the COVID-19 emergency. Publications that are especially relevant to this project include:

QQI – As the National Awarding Body for FET and HE private providers, QQI worked in consultation with all providers on the development of more detailed measures to mitigate impact of COVID-19 on programmes leading to QQI awards:

- QQI Measures to Mitigate Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Programmes Leading to QQI Awards
- QQI – COVID-19 Updates from QQI –general guidance and information

THEA – The Technological Higher Education Association:

- issued a Statement of the Presidents of Institutes of Technology on Equity of Assessment during the COVID-19 Pandemic in addition to the hosting of regular meetings of IoT registrars and of IoT presidents
- issued a student experience statement:
  http://www.thea.ie/contentFiles/THEA_student_experience_statement.pdf
- developed principles & guidelines for the delivery of programmes in IoTs:
  http://www.thea.ie/contentFiles/THEA-COVID-principles.pdf

IUA – The Irish Universities Association:

- issued a statement on the alternative assessment procedures being put in place and hosted regular meetings with presidents/provost, registrars/Vice-Presidents Academic Affairs and other core roles within the universities
- produced a set of recommendations regarding academic integrity in online assessment.

NFETL – The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning published a practical resources guide and support for the higher education community during the move to online/remote teaching, learning and assessment for students, learners and staff including:

- Collaborative Resource Sharing Spreadsheet to which a large number of partners contributed
- 10 Points to Remember when Learning Online
- 10 Ways to Ensure Online Assessment is Accessible and Inclusive
- 10 Points to Consider in Choosing Alternative Assessment Methods for the Online Environment
- Selecting Online Alternatives to Common Assessment Methods
- Reflecting and Learning: The move to remote/online teaching and learning in Irish higher education published in June 2020.

AONTAS – Ireland's National Adult Learning Organisation maintained a resource hub on their website to help learners, tutors and the community.

The Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (including Community Education Issues) Working Group was established by the Department of Education and Skills as part of its COVID-19 response. It produced guiding principles for ensuring the needs of vulnerable learners were duly understood and considered. These are outlined in a series of documents developed by the working group.

USI – The Union of Students of Ireland:

- published a student-facing insight on online learning in collaboration with the NFETL
- produced briefings and guidance notes for student officers, including on the concept of no academic disadvantage. Held regular check-ins with local students' unions and raised issues that arose from these in the Tertiary Education Sector's COVID-19 response groups.

The Irish Council for International Students (ICOS) provides

- information for international students on COVID-19
  https://www.internationalstudents.ie/information-international-students-covid-19

NStEP – The National Student Engagement Programme

- hosted a 'Student Engagement Chat' initiative, for feedback from students and staff invited to submit opinions and perspectives on student engagement in the context of the COVID-19 dilemma, preliminary findings on core themes can be found here. https://studentengagement.ie/chat/
- produced guidelines for student representatives during COVID-19
  https://studentengagement.ie/category/nstepnews/

4.2.3 Communities of practice

Various networks and projects also helped provide support, some of the many examples we could cite include:

The National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN)
This QQI facilitated network of HE providers accelerated its work from March to June 2020 in raising awareness around the importance of academic integrity and developing a common approach to this key aspect of quality assurance.

All institutions put academic integrity high on their agendas as they considered modified assessments to address COVID-19 restrictions and in communications with students.

Through its working groups, the NAIN is currently fast-tracking the development of practical support for higher education institutions, their staff and students. This will include:

- a common academic integrity lexicon that will help institutions better understand and define instances of academic cheating
- national guidance for institutions, staff, and students on how to safeguard academic integrity
- dedicated communications to raise awareness of the risks of academic cheating, and the available mitigating supports, amongst students.

Resources developed by NAIN may be useful beyond HE providers.

IUA's Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning project
IUA's 3-year Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning project, funded through the HEA's Innovation and Transformation Programme, is aimed at enhancing the digital attributes and educational experiences of Irish university students through enabling the mainstreamed and integrated use of digital technologies across the teaching and learning process. The project aims to mainstream digital in teaching and learning activities across the seven universities, by addressing the professional development of all who teach or support teaching and learning. In the context of COVID-19, the project has re-focused to support a move to a more remote and blended/hybrid approach to teaching and learning in the academic year 2020/21. Membership of the project Steering Group includes IUA, university representatives, THEA,

The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment
in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education

25 |

USI and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (NFETL).

The resources developed by the project may be useful for other HE providers.

4.2.4 Other supports

FET Professional Development Strategy
This strategy has been spearheaded by SOLAS over the past number of years particularly in relation to TEL (technology enhanced learning). This helped ETBs to develop the capacity and skills that were needed to move to online provision during the crisis.

SOLAS eCollege
SOLAS provided free online learning by opening the entire eCollege platform to providers for free. This is an online training facility that provides a range of online courses, from graphic design to data analytics. The courses focus on digital skills and are designed to match those skills that employers look for when hiring.

National Adult Literacy Association (NALA)
The National Adult Literacy Association offered free, over-the-phone training on topics ranging from fun learning resources, to support for those who may need help understanding health information. Community education is especially important in these challenging times.

> *"We understand that for parents with difficulties in reading and writing, helping children with their schoolwork can be tough." (NALA)*

HEAnet
Ireland's National Education and Research Network provides internet connectivity and associated ICT shared services across all levels of the Irish education system. The Brokerage service https://www.heanet.ie/brokerage provided by HEAnet enabled learners to access the software they needed to continue their studies during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time HEAnet received a number of requests from clients for support in moving parts of their operation online; observed a number of changes in service usage; and dealt with a number of individual requests for service enhancements.

5 Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs)

PSRBs include professional, statutory, and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). In this context we are interested in their role in, and their criteria for, the accreditation (or similar) of educational programmes.

The professional body engagement programme initiated by QQI two years ago as part of the current QQI strategy, *Finding Common Ground on Professional Accreditation*, placed us in a good position to gather and disseminate information from these bodies:

- on their communications and responses to higher education institutions (HEIs) around modifications to teaching, learning or assessment arrangements because of COVID-19, and especially
- on their flexibility around work placement and practice placement requirements (e.g. clinical practice) in the context of COVID-19 restrictions.

QQI met with some professional bodies directly to assist in addressing the challenges around work placements and student/graduate experience of practice requirements and communications with stakeholders on these matters.

5.1 Survey of PSRBs

QQI approached 17 PSRBs[12] (many of which have a statutory regulatory remit) on 23 March 2020 and invited them to respond on two topics:

- their reaction to placement arrangements and alternative assessment proposed by providers as part of their COVID-19 contingency plans, and
- any implications for learners graduating or expecting to achieve membership or professional registration of each body.

Of the 17 bodies surveyed, 11 responded.

In general, there was a consistent approach across the PSRBs, independent of their remit.

Among bodies that accredit/approve programmes, there was evidence of effective communication with the respective institutions – but not in all cases.

In respect of alternative arrangements for programme delivery and assessment most PSRBs expressed:

- confidence that the relevant provider is best placed to devise and implement contingency plans to address and deliver on the academic and professional requirements of a programme
- a willingness to be pragmatic and flexible about agreeing changes to modes or methods of assessment by the institutions within European or Irish statutory frameworks. In this regard:
  - » some expressly stipulated that this was subject to assessment of all relevant learning outcomes and/or approval by the relevant provider's governing authority
  - » some asked providers to inform the PSRB of the alternative arrangements they had put in place upon implementation or as part of annual reporting requirements
  - » one PSRB sought guidance from QQI on what is deemed acceptable from QQI's perspective, in terms of evidence required to demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes – in particular for courses at the appropriate award level on the National Framework of Qualifications.

With regard to alternative arrangements for programmes' work placement and practice placement requirements (e.g. clinical practice) most PSRBs also expressed pragmatism, for example:

- one PSRB indicated that it was willing to accept the quantum of final-year placement that had been completed as sufficient and agreed to allow registration of graduates as long as the HEI was willing to award the relevant qualification
- others were satisfied with alternative activity that captured the same learning outcomes in lieu of work placements
- agreement to reduce the final few weeks for the much longer medical academic programmes requiring professional accreditation was also accepted by some
- some PSRBs accepted the cancellation of non-essential placements without penalties, as long as these were not graduating stage (award-year) placements.

Not all professional body placement issues were resolved satisfactorily and providers, their representative bodies, THEA and IUA, and professional bodies continue to work together with the

---

12 Chartered Accountants of Ireland (CAI); the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA); the Health and Social Care Professionals Council (CORU); CPA Ireland; the Dental Council of Ireland; Engineers Ireland; the Irish Planning Institute; the Honorable Society of King's Inns (King's Inns); the Law Society of Ireland; the Medical Council of Ireland; the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland (NMBI); the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland (PSI); the Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council (PHECC); the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI); the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland (SCSI); the Teaching Council; the Veterinary Council of Ireland.

support of QQI to resolve outstanding issues involving a small number of HE programmes and their enrolled students, some of whom are due to graduate this year.

Beyond the COVID-19 emergency, QQI will continue to remain alert to international developments that may provide ideas for enhancing engagement between providers and PSRBs.

5.2 Professional body examinations

QQI spoke to some PSRBs that are both providers of programmes and examining bodies awarding qualifications[13], and in these cases, too, there was evidence of a willingness to adapt, innovate and demonstrate flexibility:

*   some PSRBs provided classes/tutorials for professional practice courses online, including further tuition online, supplemented with pre-recorded sessions and additional webinars and implemented open-book exams at the end of June; others postponed or cancelled a number of interim assessments that were due to take place in April and used marks in the final scripts as a basis for assessment
*   some planned to defer final-examination style assessments until the autumn; others indicated that online examinations supported by remote proctoring were planned.

5.3 Professional body accreditation visits to HEIs

Some PSRBs whose accreditation and accreditation renewal processes normally involve site visits, have carried out renewal visits in a virtual environment and others are exploring the use of online communication platforms for parts of the site visit (supplemented by on-site visits once restrictions have been lifted). These PSRBs involved the HEIs and accreditation team members in the establishment of the alternative arrangements.

QQI coordinated meetings with PSRBs in May and July 2020 to facilitate sharing of practice and experience of undertaking accreditation visits and examinations in virtual environments. These were well received by those who attended. Over the past number of years QQI has been working closely with PSRBs, recently, for example, towards the agreement between higher education institutions and PSRBs of shared principles for professional accreditation, programme validation and other professional engagements. It is hoped that increased engagement and sharing of information encouraged by the principles will lead to a better understanding among institutions and professional bodies of each other's roles, and that, ultimately, the principles will increase confidence and trust among all stakeholders and increased flexibility to deal with unforeseen circumstances such as the COVID-19 emergency arrangements.

---

13 Currently none of these qualifications are included in the Irish NFQ, however there are now provisions in law that may enable such qualifications to be included in the Irish NFQ. Please refer to the Green Paper on the Qualifications System for further information.

CHAPTER 3: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE RESPONSE OF THE TERTIARY EDUCATION SECTOR TO THE CHALLENGES PRESENTED BY COVID-19

Contents

1 Summary

This chapter deals with the global response of the tertiary education system to the challenges posed by the pandemic, particularly in relation to the supports put in place by the tertiary education and the quality assurance communities to respond to these challenges.

The following section looks at the response of external quality assurance (EQA) agencies in Anglophone countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and the United States, as many of these share with Ireland characteristics such as the relatively high autonomy of self-awarding higher education institutions, and the regulation of practice professions by professional bodies.

The chapter looks at adjustments made by international quality assurance bodies such as the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Register for Higher Education (EQAR) and the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) to their processes and the supports they have put in place for their member agencies.

The efforts of international higher education representative bodies such as the European University Association (EUA) and the International Association of Universities (IAU) in documenting the challenges to and supporting their members institutions during COVID-19 are outlined. Similar supports by the representative body for European higher education students, the European Students Union (ESU), are also documented.

This chapter also looks, from a range of perspectives including that of educational managers, teaching staff and learners, at COVID-19-related modifications to teaching, learning, and assessment. These include the impact of COVID-19 on assessment and areas where COVID-19 posed particular challenges such as the teaching of laboratory sciences and the fine arts.

There is a look at the documented international experience of what worked well and what did not work so well; what have people learnt that they can take forward into the future. The frequency of publications such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Education* proved to be particularly helpful when looking at the short period of interest from March-July 2020.

The overview is illustrative and not intended to be comprehensive; indeed such a study should be detailed and long-term but in keeping with the urgency of the current project, it provides just a flavour of the experience that has been highlighted to date.

2 Response and supports put in place by the quality assurance/higher education communities

The main contributions of external quality assurance agencies can be listed as follows:

- agencies have developed specific COVID-19 landing pages on their websites where the reader can find information or guidance
- agencies have put in place changes to their QA processes due to the pandemic, largely by replacing physical site visits with online ones
- agencies have developed and promulgated guidance for the higher education sector on how to maintain the quality of education and training and how to ensure that academic integrity has been maintained
- agencies have worked with education providers to analyse the impacts of the pandemic on the quality of education and training and what lessons have been learnt by the education community that may serve it well into the future

- agencies have compiled useful lists of national and international sources and links related to COVID-19 guidance on education and training.

In addition to national QA agencies, the work of the global and continental quality assurance agency networks is also described, particularly where such networks have aggregated the work of the member agencies into useful guidance.

Although this report looks at the impact of the pandemic on tertiary education, including further and vocational education and training, much of the literature available focusses on schools and higher education.

2.1 Adjustments by national quality assurance agencies to the challenges posed by COVID-19

The following section looks at the response of external quality assurance (EQA) agencies in Anglophone countries, as many of these share with Ireland characteristics such as the relatively high autonomy of self-awarding higher education institutions, and the regulation of practice professions by professional bodies.

2.1.1 United Kingdom

The Office for Students (OfS), the national regulator for higher education in England, recognises the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) as the 'designated quality body' for the quality assurance of higher education in England. QAA also acts as the national quality assurance agency for the other nations of the United Kingdom – namely Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

QAA, in common with most EQA agencies, established a dedicated webpage[1] for COVID-19. The page contains information to support providers during the pandemic and provides external sources of information both from the UK and internationally (including from Ireland), including that of Government, HE regulators and funders, and sector bodies.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, QAA has produced guidance on digital learning and academic integrity including documents on:

- questions to inform a toolkit for enhancing quality in a digital environment
- building a taxonomy for digital learning
- contracting to cheat in higher education: how to address essay mills and contract cheating
- preserving quality and standards through a time of rapid change: UK higher education in 2020-21.

QAA has also published (but behind their subscriber paywall) a set of case studies exploring 'how providers have approached planning for the academic year 2020-21 and the processes needed to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on students, staff and the wider community'. These studies cover four areas: strategic action planning, space management, assessment and communications.

In addition, QAA has produced initial COVID-19 guidance for higher education providers on standards and quality and advice to degree-awarding bodies on mitigating the disruption to Transnational Education (TNE) students caused by COVID-19.

During the period March-July 2020, QAA also produced specific thematic guidance on:

- 'Securing academic standards and supporting student achievement

---

1 QAA – COVID-19 Support and Guidance. https://www.qaa.ac.uk/news-events/support-and-guidance-covid-19

- Practice and lab-based assessment
- Work-based learning (including placement/partnerships/apprenticeships/study abroad)
- Accelerated degrees'.

Finally, QAA produced a set of supporting resources for

- TNE and International policy and practice
  » *QAA International Partners' Forum Report* (including a contribution from QQI)
  » *Effective practice in UK TNE during the COVID-19 pandemic*
- Online delivery and student experience
  » Overview of quality and standards – information for students' unions
- Academic standards and supporting student achievement
  » *Assessing with integrity in digital delivery*
  » *Should providers include a COVID-19 statement on degree transcripts: arguments for and against*
  » *No Detriment policies: an overview*
- Admission, inductions and transitions
  » *The impact of COVID-19 on admission and transitions into higher education*
  » *Admission and transitions: signposts to information and resources.*

Links to the above are available on the QAA COVID-19 Support and Guidance page referenced previously.

One area of significant challenge caused by COVID-19 is the area of student placements for degree programmes leading to the practice professions, particularly in the areas of healthcare. During the pandemic, QAA worked with the Professional and Statutory Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) and has produced a survey on how professional bodies have dealt with COVID-19[2].

For the period between July and December 2020, QAA have scheduled a series of 11 online quality clinics with QAA specialists[3].

2.1.2 United States of America (USA)

In June, the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the representative body for accreditation in the USA, published[4] an article entitled *Taking Initial Steps: A path for rethinking accreditation and quality assurance*, prompted by the COVID-19 crisis.

In common with other representative bodies, CHEA also published a list[5] of resources to support institutions and accreditors during the COVID-19 crisis.

In May, CHEA and its international arm, the CHEA International Quality Group (CIQG), organised a webinar[6] on the topic of assuring the quality of higher education during COVID-19.

CHEA also conducted and published a survey[7] on *Accreditors and Assisting Institutions and Programmes.*

---

2 QAA Survey Report – How have Professional bodies dealt with COVID-19/? https://www.qaa.ac.uk/news-events/news/survey-report-how-have-professional-bodies-dealt-with-covid-19

3 QAA online quality clinics. https://www.qaa.ac.uk/news-events/events/online-quality-clinic-with-qaa-specialists-june-july

4 CHEA – Taking initial steps: A path for rethinking Accreditation and Quality Assurance.
https://www.chea.org/taking-initial-steps-path-rethinking-accreditation-and-quality-assurance

5 CHEA – COVID-19: Resources for Institutions and Accreditors.
https://www.chea.org/covid-19-resources-institutions-and-accreditors

6 CHEA – Assuring quality in higher education in a time of crisis.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QP5didrevig&feature=youtu.be

7 CHEA – Survey: Accreditors and Assisting Institutions and Programmes.
https://www.chea.org/chea-survey-accreditors-and-assisting-institutions-and-programs

In April 2020, CHEA published a document[8] entitled *A Framework for Quality for these times.*

The framework prompted institutions to:

- check 'the accredited status of their institution and each of their programmes that have accreditation and whether they had taken advantage of extended deadlines for reports and visits or confirmed that what they were doing online is consistent with the flexibility that accrediting organisations now had, resulting from the guidelines issued by the U.S. Department of Education'
- 'check whether they had taken advantage of the information that CHEA has shared to easily learn of the COVID-19 guidance that is provided by various institutional and programmatic accrediting organisations?'
- 'Identify additional areas of needed flexibility they needed for their work and shared these with their accreditors?'

The framework identified four critical areas about quality for institutions and their accredited status relating to:

- *Online Teaching and Learning:* asking whether 'in the remote-access-driven climate, has the institution and its teaching staff engaged in discussion and decisions about the quality of offerings that are now online, e.g., curriculum, assignments, grading practices and robust interaction with students in various teaching and learning environments?'
- *Student Support:* 'Are institutions engaging with students working remotely to provide connection, counselling and academic advising as needed, especially for students for whom remote access and online learning is a first-time experience?'
- *Finances:* Noting that 'many, if not all, institutions are facing significant financial challenges as part of the COVID-19 environment, what steps are institutions taking and what plans are they making to address these financial difficulties and in what ways is maintaining quality part of this discussion?'
- *Governance:* 'What steps are institutions and governing boards taking to plan for the ongoing education of the students enrolled in institutions for the new academic year and how can institutions do the best they can to assure that students can continue their education at a level of quality that is acceptable and, as needed, to complete their studies or graduate on time?'

2.1.3 Australia

The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) is Australia's independent national quality assurance and regulatory agency for higher education.

In line with other regulators (including QQI and QAA) and accelerated by the challenges of COVID-19, TEQSA established a new Higher Education Integrity Unit in June 2020 and received Australian Government funding to strengthen the agency's ability to identify and protect against risk to the integrity of the nation's higher education sector.

In a similar manner to other national education quality regulators, TEQSA maintains a webpage of COVID-19 resources[9].

This includes:

- *FAQ on reducing the administrative burden of regulation during COVID-19*
- *Information about good practice in online learning*
- *COVID-19-related complaints to the Overseas Students Ombudsman*

---

8 CHEA – A Framework for Quality for these times. https://www.chea.org/framework-quality-these-times
9 TEQSA – COVID-19 Resources. https://www.teqsa.gov.au/covid-19-resources

- *Regulatory information for universities, VET, ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) and higher education providers,*
- *National principles for clinical education during COVID-19*

In common with other agencies like QQI and QAA, TEQSA have also been working on the impacts of COVID-19 with professional accreditation bodies[10].

When the pandemic struck in March, TEQSA partnered with the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA), the national regulator for vocational education and training (VET), to release a joint statement[11] relating to flexible delivery of education and training programmes indicating that 'all training and assessment in the Australian Qualifications Framework must meet high quality standards regardless of the location of the student and the mode of delivery.'

The statement identified that 'as long as the student remained enrolled with their provider, and the assessment requirements of the course allow it, the location of the student and the mode of delivery should not form an impediment to the attainment of an Australian qualification.'

National regulators, including ASQA and TEQSA, also indicated their 'willingness to be flexible in supporting students to study online either in Australia or offshore'.

The statement further noted that it is 'the responsibility of providers to assure themselves that such arrangements maintain assessment and quality standards and are appropriately documented and that not all qualifications are suited to online learning, particularly those with mandatory work placements'.

2.1.4 New Zealand

In May 2020, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), the regulator for the quality assurance of tertiary education in New Zealand, published its approach[12] to external QA during the pandemic indicating how it wished 'to support education providers by adapting their QA activities in a fit-for-purpose way to reduce the risk to learners'.

In June 2020, NZQA published a package[13] of relief and assistance measures for non-university tertiary education organisations (TEOs) experiencing difficulty due to the impact of COVID-19'.

These measures included:

- 'rescheduling External Evaluation and Reviews
- extending temporary online delivery approvals
- an option to defer the Private Training Establishments (PTEs) Annual Fee payment (on request)
- an option for PTEs to remain registered while inactive
- extending acceptance of online English language testing to offshore students
- deferring international code annual self-review attestations to December 2020'

---

10 TEQSA - Impacts of COVID-19 on industry professional accreditation.
    https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/articles/impacts-covid-19-industry-professional-accreditation

11 TEQSA-ASQA – Joint TEQSA and ASQA Statement relating to flexible delivery.
    https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/articles/joint-teqsa-and-asqa-statement-relating-flexible-delivery

12 NZQA – Ongoing Quality assurance for Tertiary Education Organisations - Approach to COVID-19.
    https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/about-us/covid-19/quality-assurance/

13 NZQA – COVID-19: Package of Assistance Measures. https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/about-us/news/assistance-measures/

2.2 Adjustments by quality assurance/higher education peak bodies to the challenges of COVID-19

2.2.1 European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

In March 2020, the umbrella body for European quality assurance agencies, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), made a statement[14] on COVID-19.

The statement assured its over 50 member agencies that decisions on ENQA membership or registration on the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) would 'not be jeopardised due to the pandemic, neither due to a delay in the review process, nor due to the suspension or the adaption of agencies' usual external quality assurance activities'.

Similarly, ENQA encouraged its members to show 'flexibility in their own review processes of higher education institutions, adapting your current activities where necessary and seeking ways to support higher education institutions, who are facing an unprecedented disruption to their normal operations'.

ENQA noted that, during the pandemic its member quality assurance agencies could play 'an important role in offering guidance and support on matters such as the transfer to online learning and teaching, alternative assessment methods and maintaining academic standards and student support services'.

To help facilitate this, ENQA launched a social media campaign on Twitter[15], LinkedIn and Facebook encouraging members to share their policies, practices and other resources so that members can learn from each other, including 'practices for suspension or postponement of site visits and other supports for higher education institutions'.

As a follow up to the social media campaign, ENQA published a compendium[16] of such practices (including a contribution from QQI) which is frequently updated.

ENQA also organised a webinar[17] (that QQI participated in) on online site visits and external quality assurance in times of COVID-19 in June 2020.

2.2.2 European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR)

The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) is the register of external quality assurance agencies that lists those agencies that have demonstrated their substantial compliance with a common set of principles for quality assurance in Europe.

EQAR published guidance in March 2020 in the form of a FAQ[18] designed to assist agencies with the challenges faced by them due to COVID-19.

In the guidance, EQAR noted that COVID-19 'impacts the work and daily life of everyone involved in European higher education and that we are ready to support our members, registered quality assurance agencies and its partners in the challenges you face during the pandemic'.

EQAR indicated that while 'a site visit to the institution/programme under review is normally required in an external quality assurance process that is compliant with the European Standards and Guidelines,

---

14 ENQA – Statement on COVID-19. https://enqa.eu/index.php/enqa-statement-on-covid-19-pandemic/

15 ENQA – QA From Home. https://twitter.com/ENQAtwt/status/1243124403455623170

16 ENQA – External QA in the time of COVID-19 – Case examples from ENQA member agencies.
     https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/External-QA-in-times-of-COVID-19_case-examples.pdf

17 ENQA – Webinar on online site visits and external quality assurance in times of COVID-19. https://enqa.eu/index.php/events/
     enqa-webinar-online-site-visits-and-external-quality-assurance-in-times-of-covid-19/

18 EQAR – COVID-19 consequences. https://www.eqar.eu/covid-19/

in the current situation and during the time where site visits cannot actually be organised, it is perfectly acceptable to replace site visits by videoconferences or other appropriate format, to be determined by the agency and that 'alternatively, site visits could be postponed to a later time if that is possible'.

2.2.3 Other International Organisations

International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)
In April 2020, INQAAHE, the global network for external quality assurance agencies, issued its principles[19] for crisis management during COVID-19.
In the document, the INQAAHE Board presented a set of principles to guide EQA agency action during crisis periods. These principles were:

- 'Integrity
- Student Protection
- Equity and Access
- Faster and better Coordination
- Be there for your stakeholders
- Clear Communication Plans'.

In July 2020, INQAAHE published the results of a survey[20] on the *Impacts and Challenges of COVID-19 in the Higher Education and Quality Assurance sector*. The survey listed the top three challenges faced by EQA agencies during the pandemic as:

- 'Cancellation or postponement of face-to-face activities such as onsite visits
- Limited participation in international QA network activities and
- International cooperation projects being suspended'.

In the survey, the top three responses and initiatives taken by EQA agencies to support the higher education system and higher education institutions were the:

- 'Development of online materials and resources for the higher education institutions to support their QA mechanisms
- Development of guidelines to support the higher education institutions in their transition to online learning
- Implementation of action plans in conjunction with Government to support students'.

European University Association (EUA)
In May 2020, EUA, the representative body for European Universities and European Rectors Conferences, published an article[21] entitled *Digital Learning and Teaching – Ensuring Quality during the COVID crisis*.

The article noted that universities, generally, were better equipped for the transition to digital learning and teaching than schools in that 'universities have at least some experience in offering online teaching and blended learning has gained ground in recent years'. EUA noted that 'the key challenge in most cases has, therefore, been related to extending the online offer to cover all teaching and, in this context, to the part of the curriculum that does not easily translate into online mode, such as laboratory work or other practical exercises'.

---

19 INQAAHE – Principles for crisis management.
    https://www.inqaahe.org/sites/default/files/INQAAHE-Principles-for-crisis-management.pdf
20 INQAAHE - Impacts and Challenges of COVID-19 in the Higher Education and Quality Assurance Sector
    https://www.inqaahe.org/sites/default/files/INQAAHE-COVID-19-Survey-results.pdf
21 EUA – Digital Learning and Teaching. Ensuring Quality during the COVID-19 Crisis.
    https://eua.eu/resources/expert-voices/174:digital-learning-and-teaching-ensuring-quality-during-the-covid-19-crisis.html

The article continues that 'past experience in online learning and teaching has shown that there is no reason to distrust the quality of online education more than the quality of education taking place in a more traditional way' and in fact, because 'universities started to experiment with online teaching in the past when quality assurance practices were becoming widespread, particular attention has already been paid to the quality assurance of online learning'. This is reflected in 'the fact that there is already a large variety of specific quality assurance tools for online higher education'. Indeed, the ESG, which 'lay out expectations towards internal and external quality assurance, apply to all higher education offered regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery'. EUA indicate that 'this means that long before the current COVID-19 crisis, universities had already been obliged to have quality assurance processes in place for e-learning, in the same way as for other provision and, due to this, online provision is covered by the quality assurance agencies' work'.

A report[22] on quality assurance of e-learning provision by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) confirms 'the applicability of the ESG standards to e-learning' and the report provides 'additional considerations as to the quality standards and aspects to consider when developing quality assurance procedures for e-learning'.

The report notes that prior to the completion of the 2019-20 academic year, European universities sought 'alternative ways to organise assessments', noting that 'ensuring fair and transparent assessment of student learning is a key part of any internal quality assurance system and universities issued additional guidance in this regard'. Equally the report continues, 'staff development to ensure their skills and competences in delivering online learning and ensuring appropriate student support services are key components any internal quality assurance system and the current crisis is underlining their importance even more'.

International Association of Universities (IAU)
One of the global umbrella bodies for higher education institutions, the International Association of Universities (IAU), has also produced a webpage[23] on COVID-19: Higher Education challenges and responses. The IAU has a broad global membership and is particularly well represented in Africa.

Among the highlights of the survey were:

- almost all higher education institutions had 'infrastructure in place to communicate with their students and staff about COVID-19' but 'despite this, respondents reported an immediate challenge to ensure clear and effective communication streams with staff and students'.
- almost all respondents believe 'that COVID-19 will have an impact on the enrolment numbers for the new academic year and almost half believe that the impact will affect both international and local students'
- two-thirds of higher education institutions reported that 'their senior management and faculty have been consulted by public or government officials in the context of public policy development relating to COVID-19'
- almost half of respondents indicated that 'their government/ministry of education would support their institution in mitigating the disruption COVID-19 is causing'
- the shift from 'face-to-face to distance teaching did not come without challenges, the main ones being access to technical infrastructure, competences and pedagogies for distance learning and the requirements of specific fields of study'
- at the same time, the 'forced move to distance teaching and learning offers important opportunities

---

22 ENQA – TESLA: Framework for the Quality Assurance of e-Assessment.
    https://enqa.eu/indirme/papers-and-reports/associated-reports/D4.7%20Framework%20screen%20TeSLA%202606.pdf
23 IAU - COVID-19: Higher Education challenges and responses.
    https://www.iau-aiu.net/IMG/pdf/iau_covid19_and_he_survey_report_final_may_2020.pdf

to propose more flexible learning possibilities, explore blended or hybrid learning and to mix synchronous with asynchronous learning'

- the pandemic has had 'an impact on international student mobility at the majority of institutions'
- most of the institutions reported that 'research has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic at their institutions'
- the most common impact of COVID-19 has been 'the cancellation of international travel and the cancellation or postponement of scientific conferences'
- almost all institutions reported that 'they had researchers who were contributing to current public policy development'.
- three quarters of institutions were 'contributing to public policies either through their institutional leadership or through their researchers'
- a quarter of higher education institutions are considered 'important stakeholders for public policies development by their governments, both as institutions that need to be consulted, and for their expertise in research'.

European Students Union (ESU)
The representative body for national student unions in Europe, the European Students Union (ESU) organised several webinars as part of its response to COVID-19.

These included webinars

- on asking students the question 'How is your student life during the COVID-19 pandemic?'[24]
- on E-learning – from emergency provision to better learning opportunities[25]
- on COVID-19 and changing policies for student assessment[26]
- ESU also addressed an area most badly hit by the pandemic, that of student mobility and the implications for the very popular ERASMUS programme were considered in a helpful FAQ[27].

3 International Perspectives on the COVID-19-related Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment (TLA)

This report looked for answers, from a range of perspectives including that of educational managers, teaching staff and learners, to questions in respect of the COVID-19-related modifications to teaching, learning, and assessment, such as:

1. What were the main differences?
2. What worked well?
3. What did not work as well as hoped but could have been improved?
4. What in hindsight might have been done differently?
5. What worked so well that it could be retained beyond the emergency?
6. How were the changes to TLA overseen, coordinated/quality assured?
7. What international developments are noteworthy and how does Ireland compare?

---

24 ESU- Webinar – how is your student life during the COVID-19 pandemic?
https://www.esu-online.org/?news=how-is-your-student-life-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-take-this-survey

25 ESU – Webinar – E-learning: from emergency provision to better learning opportunities. https://www.esu-online.org/?news=stream-now-the-first-webinar-on-e-learning-from-emergency-provision-to-better-learning-opportunities

26 ESU – Webinar – COVID-19 and changing policies for student assessment
https://www.esu-online.org/?news=stream-now-the-webinar-covid-19-and-changing-policies-for-student-assessment

27 ESU – COVID-19 and its implication for the ERASMUS programme.
https://www.esu-online.org/?news=covid-19-and-its-implications-on-the-erasmus-programme

The following looks at some of the international literature that has been published in relation to some of the questions above. It is not intended to be comprehensive and indeed such a study should be detailed and long-term but in keeping with the urgency in the current project, it provides a flavour of the experience that has been highlighted to date.

The source of the publication is given in each case but it may also be helpful to direct the reader to some very useful sources that cover (higher) education in general but that also continue to focus on the impacts and challenges of COVID-19 .

These include:

- University World News
- Times Higher Education (THE) (subscription required)
- QS Quacquarelli Symonds
- Inside Higher Education
- The Chronicle of Higher Education (registration required)
- WONKHE
- HEPI

In addition, a very useful overview of sources on the impact of COVID-19 on international higher education has been produced by the German Academic Exchange Network (DAAD)[28].

This source list looks at:

- *The impact of COVID-19 on higher education internationalisation and international academic mobility worldwide and in specific countries or regions*
- *The impact of COVID-19 on higher education and students in general including:*
  - » *Global and cross-national analyses*
  - » *Studies and simulation on social distancing measures in higher education institutions*
  - » *Web talks and townhalls on COVID-19 and higher education*

3.1 Impact of COVID-19 on assessment

One of the biggest challenges in the pivot to online learning is that of assessment. Without the haven of students corralled in an invigilated examination centre, how could higher education institutions ensure that the enrolled student is presenting and completing their own work for assessment?

An article[29] in the June 2020 edition of the Joint Information System Committee *JISC news entitled How COVID-19 has changed student assessment for good*, noted that a February 2020 JISC report concluded that 'the archaic pen and paper assessment process needed a technological overhaul by 2025' but 'little did we all know that the pandemic would necessitate that switch much sooner'.

The report also shared 'a set of three minimum requirements for a well-designed digital assessment system in 2030', which needs to be:

- 'Relevant: Enabling universities to go beyond traditional forms of assessment, making use of

---

28 DAAD – COVID-19 Impact on International Higher education: studies and forecasts
    https://www.daad.de/en/information-services-for-higher-education-institutions/centre-of-competence/covid-19-impact-on-international-higher-education-studies-and-forecasts/
29 JISC - How COVID-19 has changed student assessment for good.
    https://www.jisc.ac.uk/news/how-covid-19-has-changed-student-assessment-for-good-15-jun-2020

innovative assessment methods too impractical to deliver without digital tools
- Adaptable: Effective in addressing the needs of a growing and diverse student population, a range of providers and any number of geographies
- Trustworthy: Based on solid foundations of academic integrity, security, privacy and fairness'.

A post[30] on the National Public Radio (NPR) website from April 2020 noted changes in how colleges were grading students during COVID-19.

It noted that many universities were 'hesitant to make changes to their grading system for the semester despite how drastically students' lives have changed considering the pandemic' but that 'some colleges, however, put the power in their students' hands. University of California Davis and the University of Vermont, for instance, gave students 'the option between taking a course for a grade or taking a class pass-fail'. Other universities made 'all their courses pass-fail, including a handful of Ivy League colleges like Yale University and Columbia University'.

The authors noted that 'students across the country argued — and organised around the idea — that universities should grant them leniency when it comes to grades for the Spring 2020 semester as the stress and uncertainty of the pandemic has made it difficult to focus on or prioritise their studies'.

Students at several universities 'created petitions and contacted their administration to argue why it is unethical to allow a student to fail or stress about their GPA during a global pandemic, and students at Yale University successfully convinced the administration to switch to a pass-fail grading system for the Spring 2020 semester'.

Other colleges 'held back on changing grading policies because they were worried about accreditation issues if they removed grades for the semester' even though 'some Ivy League colleges, such as Brown University, have been entirely grade-optional for decades'.

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, a regional accreditation agency, indicated, however, that universities would not jeopardise their accreditation status if they changed their grading system in light of COVID-19,'indicating that they had a number of our institutions switch from a letter grade to a pass-fail option, which they approved, in line with the guidance from the US Department of Education'.

The article concludes by noting that while most students seemed to be 'vouching for a universal pass-fail policy, there is also a significant number of students who would prefer to be graded as usual'. The authors noted that 'some students who are interested in graduate school, for example, might be hoping to boost their GPA in the Spring 2020 semester, especially as programmes like Harvard Medical School have announced that although they will accept pass-fail grading for Spring 2020 coursework, they would prefer letter grades if students were given that option at their particular university'.

An article[31] on QS.com from April 2020 looked at how universities are assessing their students remotely. The article noted that there was 'much uncertainty surrounding assessments, and how teaching staff can continue to track student progress without access to traditional examination methods they so often rely on'.

In April, the article notes that there was 'no universal agreement regarding the fate of university examinations' and that 'every country was experiencing its own unique crisis regarding the coronavirus; facing its own challenges and choosing to respond to these differently'. Consequently, 'universities across the world largely made their own decisions regarding official examinations, with some moving exams online, postponing, or cancelling them all together'.

---

30 NPR – How Colleges are Grading Students during Coronavirus.
   https://www.npr.org/2020/04/10/830622398/how-colleges-are-grading-students-during-coronavirus?t=1595948052906
31 QS – How Universities are assessing students remotely. https://www.qs.com/how-universities-are-assessing-students-remotely/

In the UK, Imperial College London claimed 'a world first by successfully assessing 280 final year medical students online' where according to the university's head of undergraduate medicine, "No university has been brave enough to run open-book, digitalised medical examinations in this way before but if we show it has behaved in a similar way to a closed-book exam, then that is a new era for medical assessment".' The university made the decision 'to quickly proceed in this way after a student-led petition asking to postpone final year exams began to receive a lot of attention'.

Students from Cambridge were said to have 'first sparked the campaign, which called on their university to overhaul its summer exams amid widespread fears that the outbreak will adversely affect their exam performance'. As a result, both Oxford and Cambridge made the decision 'to replace summer exams with online assessments', adding that students 'unable to do this due to "illness, caring responsibilities, or technical difficulties" would be allowed to undertake assessment at a later, as yet undetermined date.'

The National Union of Students (NUS) in the UK also called 'for all "non-essential" examinations for second year and undergraduates to be cancelled given the current disruptions'. The NUS 'highlighted the challenges faced by disabled students who were facing the loss of both university-provided and national health service support, a lack of reasonable adjustments to access online teaching, as well as struggles with accommodation.'

In Italy, one of the country's most badly hit by the pandemic, the article notes that 'universities such as the University of Bologna and the University of Pisa moved their assessments online, utilising web conferencing and other platforms to do so'.

However, the article continues, with 'online assessments not being completed under the watchful eye of an invigilator, the potential for cheating becomes clear'. In Singapore, its national university had to deal with allegations of cheating after COVID-19 forced some practical assessment into the online space. According to reports, a 'significant number of students allegedly shared their answers and plagiarised each other.'

The article noted that there are 'many tools available to help institutions continue to assess students and that some platforms such as *Janison* provide 'higher education institutions and government organisations with the option of developing their own online assessment programme'. The platform allows 'a teacher to personalise their assessments, selecting from 20 different question types including multiple choice, written and spoken tests, and real-life scenario questions'. The digital assessments also have 'analytics functionality, which provides universities with deep insights into the performance of each individual student'.

There are also many companies who have transferred their examinations online, noting the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) both transferred their tests online and used 'human invigilators to prevent cheating'.

In looking to the future, the article noted that 'assessments are a critical element of the teaching and learning process' and that 'where possible, and where student performance is not hindered by remote working, teaching staff should strive to continue to assess throughout this current crisis'. The authors note that 'not only does this help to keep students engaged during their time in isolation, but it also gives teaching staff a good indication of whether their online teaching methods are effective'.

Some studies have shown that there are 'also unique benefits to online examinations, in that students are also less anxious about online exams than traditional sit-down examinations'. Students attribute this to 'being able to do practice tests online, which assisted them in knowing what to study and that helped them to pace their revision, so they did not just cram for the final exam'.

With such benefits to online assessments, the authors argue that 'this trend may continue once the coronavirus abates' and the article concludes by highlighting the 'importance of institutions across the world exploring online assessment; not only in response to current events, but also to ensure they don't get left behind in the future'.

UNSECO published a document[32] in April 2020 entitled *Exams and assessments in the COVID-19 crisis: fairness at the centre.* The document noted that 'the vocational education and training field posed a specific set of challenges, in that there is a greater risk in vocational education and training that the effects of the pandemic will increase inequalities and drop-out rates, noting the higher share of low-income students in this category and their lower access to devices and connectivity'.

In relation to universities, it was noted that 'with all face-to-face teaching and traditional examinations being suspended, that in the case of students in their final year, universities were working to ensure they can graduate on time with a quality assured degree by making maximum use of assessments and completed coursework'.

The paper concluded by emphasising that 'all decisions were being made in a context of uncertainty, based on numerous factors, from the overriding concern over health and safety to ensuring equity and equal opportunity in exams and assessments noting that the education world has been imposed, globally, in an experiment in remote learning'.

To assist providers, Turnitin, the most prominent commercial provider of software to detect contract cheating, developed a blog[33] to help prevent cheating during COVID-19.

Turnitin contend that 'remote learning is a powerful platform for learning under many circumstances, affording increased flexibility for students with challenging schedules, access anywhere and anytime, including during a pandemic'.

Turnitin further noted, however, 'when undertaken under emergency circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the transition to remote learning can be stressful' and 'when students are stressed, lack connection to learning and to their teachers, and are struggling, they are more tempted to take short cut solutions like cheating'.

The company indicated that they were hearing the following concerns in relation to academic integrity when it came to remote learning:

- 'When allowing students to write essays at home with open-book essays, how do you know the student wrote the essay?
- When assignments are completed in non-regulated, unsupervised circumstances, how do you know if parents, friends, and other family members are "helping?"
- As summer approaches and exams are being moved online, will students think "I can get someone else to take my exam for me now?"'.

Turnitin made some specific helpful suggestions to prevent contract cheating in remote learning classrooms:

- *Define contract cheating for remote learners*
  » In an institution's 'academic integrity statement, include contract cheating as an act of misconduct'

---

32 UNESCO – Exams and assessment in the COVID-19 crisis: fairness at the centre.
    https://en.unesco.org/news/exams-and-assessments-covid-19-crisis-fairness-centre

33 Turnitin – How to prevent contract cheating in remote learning.
    https://www.turnitin.com/blog/how-to-prevent-contract-cheating-in-remote-learning

- *Establish teacher-student rapport to discuss challenging issue like contract cheating*
  - » **'Positive feedback is more important than ever in remote learning** to fortify student confidence and learning and to prevent academic misconduct and contract cheating'
  - » **Students need to be seen** for all education environments. Students may 'crave more one on one interaction—universities should consider hosting office hours online and even if students do not show up, staff are making themselves available, and thus reassuring students that they are there for them'.
  - » 'Listening is always important, but **in remote and online learning environments, listening is more critical**, as pathways for communication narrow to online platforms'.
- *Address specific learning needs of remote learners*
  - » English Language Learners (ELLs) are 'especially vulnerable to contract cheating companies, which prey on students with specific needs and learning challenges – namely those who struggle and whose focus may not be on writing as their primary intellectual pursuit'. Staff should 'consider having their lectures subtitled and recorded to support ELL students, as well as students with hearing impairments and the visual learners in their courses. Supported students are less apt to cheat'.
  - » Additionally, students with disabilities will need extra support as well. Ensure that 'lectures are recorded so that students with auditory learning difficulties can re-watch your lecture'. Staff should 'describe the visuals they are presenting to accommodate students with visual impairments'.

3.2 Areas with particular challenges during COVID-19 – teaching laboratory sciences and fine arts

It was recognised early on in the crisis that while the chalk-and-talk lecture could be replicated online with relative ease, a much greater challenge lay in trying to provide credible alternatives to the likes of laboratory practical sessions, medical demonstrations and the creative fine arts experience.

An article[34] from April 2020 in *Inside Higher Education* outlined the challenges of teaching laboratory sciences and the fine arts remotely.

- **Remote STEM**
  Examples given here included anatomy staff who 'shared 3-D mesh and other kinds of skeletal images online on such websites as *MorphoSource* and *Sketchfab'*. Even with such supports, it was noted that 'one graduate student in a mixed-level class had already asked to sit in on it the next time it was offered for the "authentic experience"'.

  One teacher had coincidentally taught 'a computation-based module on the flu in her organisms and populations laboratory class at the beginning of the semester pre COVID-19'. The projects aim was 'to track the flu season on the genetic sequencing database *Nextstrain* and ultimately recommend a course of action to the World Health Organisation for next year's flu season'. It was noted that 'students became more and more engaged in tracking COVID-19 as the weeks wore on'.

- **Simulations and Accreditation**
  Simulated laboratory technologies are already available and are being used increasingly during the pandemic. *Labster*, for example, donated 'millions worth of services to college and university instructors affected by the disruption', noting that 'many institutions lack top laboratory facilities and even campuses with the best equipment may bar students from using their high-end tools'.

---

34 Inside Higher Education - Teaching Lab Sciences and Fine Arts during COVID-19. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/14/teaching-lab-sciences-and-fine-arts-during-covid-19

Education technology was said to have 'its sceptics however, and there are certainly some things it cannot teach'. A lecturer in biology explained that 'remote instruction prevents her from teaching her students essential fine motor skills, like using a micropipette'.

Accreditation is another consideration. How do external bodies responsible for assuring quality in practical programmes adapt to COVID-19? The Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), which accredits 'thousands of programmes in the applied and natural sciences, computing, and engineering, advised institutions not to alert it to short-term adaptations due to the coronavirus'. ABET's chief accreditation officer indicated that he fully understood that 'institutions and programmes were having to make accommodations to safeguard their communities and contribute to the containment of the virus'. He indicated that what is 'most important is a programme's ongoing ability, regardless of delivery method, to demonstrate that it is enabling the achievement of the student outcomes associated with the programme'.

- **Creative Arts**
  Many arts instructors noted that the hardest part of teaching is 'the lack of one-on-one, face-to-face instruction that automatically occurs in a normal classroom,' and that 'It is not possible to show the students how to do something by drawing on their actual drawing,' An instructor 'can, of course, film a video, or digitally draw on their drawing photo but that is not the same at all and something is definitely lost in the process.'

Another instructor noted that "online teaching is definitely more work than teaching in person, as it requires more mental effort and even more preparation." The same instructor generated a video and lengthy post on five mistakes to avoid while teaching online. She recommends that instructors:

» 'put yourselves on video for your students, even if you are camera-shy, to build presence'
» set 'reminders and time-specific deadlines'
» use 'platforms your students already use' such as YouTube
» offer 'students different modes of communication with the instructor' and
» be 'flexible and accept substitutions'.

The authors note that just as 'a science instructor can't teach a student to hold a micropipette online', a print-making instructor 'can't teach students in a print-making class precisely how to hold their tools, indicating that "No, don't do it that way." which is such a big part of teaching is much harder now'.

- **Exhibitions**
  The authors note that 'the arts are meant to be shared' and the cancellation of visual art shows, music and dance performances are 'hardest on students who are finishing their degrees, as final year and graduate students were looking forward to public presentation and capstone experiences'.

As in the sciences, external accreditation is 'a reality for many arts programmes but it was noted that accreditors have, by and large, been accommodating in these usual circumstances'.

In addition to daily changes, arts instructors were already looking to the future, to how COVID-19 will have an impact on education in the creative and performing arts, one noting that 'Artists are resilient, innovative and imaginative, and we'll figure it out.'

3.3 What worked well and what didn't work so well?

One of the challenges of the pivot to emergency remote teaching is to try and evaluate what changes worked well and what proved more difficult.

An incisive article[35] published in May 2020 in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* by three American academics described '5 myths about remote teaching in the COVID-10 crisis.'

The article's authors posit that, 'like everyone else, academics have been overwhelmed by the transitions everyone is making at work and at home', noting that 'some academic staff members have handled the emergency "online pivot" better than others but that most have given it their all'. Their critique is not 'to dismiss the concerns and criticisms but to put them in context and counter what they see as the five most damaging and unfair myths about the move to remote teaching'.

- **'Myth No. 1: Face-to-face classes suddenly became online courses'**
  The article notes that, in fact, they did not. What happened to teaching in Spring 2020 was 'a temporary, emergency shift' that was 'not at all typical of online education'. The authors noted that 'it usually takes at least six months, and sometimes a year, to design, develop, and build an online course'. During that process, academic staff work 'with instructional designers, technologists, and others on content delivery, assignment design, and assessment'. The process is 'largely about quality, not speed'. Because of how quickly the pandemic came on, academics simply 'did not have the luxury of time for the careful design and preparation of typical online courses'. Most institutions 'shifted to remote teaching or distance learning in the simplest and most accessible ways possible — via basic technology tools such as learning-management systems, web conferencing platforms, email, and phone'.

  Academia was said to be and still is 'in a time of pedagogical triage, in relation to higher education's shift to remote teaching' but 'triage was never the mission or purpose of online teaching. It needs to be more than that'.

- **'Myth No. 2: Campuses were unprepared for this unprecedented transition'**
  The authors note that in relation to the scale and speed of the transition, they 'absolutely were not prepared for that', noting that 'no one could have predicted a nationwide emptying of campus classrooms'.

  The real revelation, they contend, was 'the remarkable ways in which many institutions mobilised the expertise in campus teaching centres, libraries, IT departments, and instructional-design offices to help academic staff become familiar with virtual teaching tools and environments very, very quickly'. Those things experts 'have been doing every day in this crisis are the same things they have been doing for years, but with greater visibility now'.

  It was noted that 'the level of preparedness for this emergency shift varied from campus to campus' and that 'some American public institutions (after years of cuts in state appropriations) and some private colleges (with limited financial resources) ran on bare-bones administrative, infrastructural, and pedagogical support'.

  The authors note that, as was happening in many sectors of the US economy, 'volunteerism is exploding across higher education' whereby 'experts have been reaching out well beyond their campus borders to help others' through 'impromptu Facebook groups, public video tutorials, email lists, blog posts, collaboratively curated websites, and even offers of virtual class visits have popped up to offer support academic staff at all types of institution'.

---

35 The Chronicle of Higher Education – 5 Myths about Remote Teaching in the COVID-19 crisis.
    https://www.chronicle.com/article/5-myths-about-remote-teaching-in-the-covid-19-crisis/

- **'Myth No. 3: The quality of teaching suffered in the online pivot'**
  The authors noted that academic staff found 'this abrupt transition disruptive, unsettling, and dissatisfying but this was hardly surprising'. Citing a survey of staff and academic administrators, 'in almost all the institutions surveyed, academics with no previous online teaching experience were called upon to move classes online' with 'most faculty respondents reported using teaching methods they had never used before'. Approximately half of academic respondents 'reduced the amount of work they expected students to complete, while about one-third lowered their expectations for the quality of student work'.

  The authors note that results such as this, taken out of context, would 'certainly make it seem as if the quality of instruction has suffered this semester' but suggest that, in fact, 'adjustments by academic staff in this crisis are probably evidence of good teaching, not bad'.

  The authors point to the 'large body of research that has documented that good teaching is good teaching, whether it happens in a physical or a virtual classroom' and 'rather than a collection of tips and tricks, good teaching is guided by research on how students learn'.

  The report suggests that 'in adjusting their assignments, expectations, and grading this semester, faculty responded to the specific needs of their students at a point in time, and how they learn'. That, the authors contend, is 'good teaching' noting that 'the conversations staff have been having about how to reach students with limited access to technology or high-speed Wi-Fi —such as "Can students do this work from a phone?", "What learning activities can be shifted to asynchronous schedules?", "Is video really necessary for this conversation?", "How can I share my material without placing heavy demands on data download?" — are evidence of good teaching'.

  The authors contend that 'to have maintained the same expectations, to have kept assignments as planned, to have required the same amount of work and expected the same quality of work as before COVID-19 would have been bad, unethical teaching'.

- **'Myth No. 4: Academic staff did not know what to do'**
  The authors noted that, of course, academic staff felt 'a level of anxiety and uncertainty about how well the semester has gone and of course some didn't know how to use this technology or that tool' but suggest 'that is very different from not knowing what they're doing in teaching students'.

  The article suggests that, in fact, 'staff knew what to do when they faced the unknowns of remote instruction' that 'many reached out to their campus colleagues — academic developers, instructional designers, educational technologists, librarians — in unprecedented numbers to fill the gaps'. In these circumstances, they note that 'it doesn't take a village, it takes a campus'. As more than one staff member in teaching centres and IT offices was reported to have said, 'I never thought we would ever be considered "essential services".'

  Academic staff also knew 'they could draw on research to guide them, including scholarship on teaching in times of crisis' noting that a 2007 survey[36] by two American academics on 'what students wanted from their professors after September 11, 2001, Hurricane Katrina, and other "collective tragedies" is illuminating: Ultimately, students wanted their professors to "do something, just about anything."'

  The authors note that 'that simple plea points to the immediate need for care and connection in teaching, wherever it takes place'. In the first week after many campuses stopped face-to-face

---

36 In the Eye of the Storm: Students' Perceptions of Helpful Faculty Actions Following a Collective Tragedy.
   https://podnetwork.org/content/uploads/In_the_Eye.pdf

instruction, it was noted that 'social media was full of examples of how faculty members checked in with students (individually and class wide), and shared their own mixture of anxiety ("I'm figuring this out, too") and commitment to the students ("I've got you").'

Academic staff concerns about 'feeling out of their element and losing vulnerable students' are viewed 'to come from a place of deep empathy and care, and from a sense of humility in the face of global crisis, when, in some ways, none of them know what they are doing. Yet at the same time, staff do know what to do to make it work: Looking to expertise (including their own), listening, and adapting'.

- **'Myth No. 5: This is the end of higher education as we know it'**
  The authors contend that 'this experience will be a game changer, and no one yet knows what all those changes will be. The easy way forward would be to over rely on technological solutions. But the easy way is not always the right way'.

  The articles suggest that the 'wise way forward is to have nuanced, thoughtful conversations about how staff are going to teach in the coming months' noting that 'faculty have begun to re-examine their teaching practices and reconsider students' academic and emotional needs in new and different ways'.

  The article notes that 'this crisis has also brought academics together'; that 'new communities of teachers have been built online, virtually overnight, for peer mentoring and resource sharing'. They suggest that 'important conversations about how teaching has changed, and how it should change, are happening right now. It's not an end; it's a beginning.'

  The article cites a professor of history at Grand View University, describing teaching as "a radical act of hope," "an assertion of faith," and "a commitment to the future even if we can't clearly discern its shape."

  The article concludes by noting that 'Yes, teaching has changed. Yes, the months ahead look uncertain. But we would prefer to look past the jeremiads to the research, the studies, and the articles on teaching, and find ways to change higher education for the better'.

An article[37] in the Electronic Engineering community journal *IEEE Spectrum* from May 2020 indicated that online learning kept higher education open during Coronavirus but noted that pandemic pedagogy is not the same as quality online learning. Three key takeaways from the article are:

- 'Key technologies made the shift to online learning possible
- Emergency Online Learning Is not the same as a well-planned virtual course
- Students and faculty still prefer in-person classes to pandemic pedagogy'

An article[38] from April 2020 in *Teach online.ca* notes '5 key lessons learned from academic staff moving their courses online due to COVID-19':

- 'Technology cannot replace the work of a teacher
- Engagement is as important as content
- Design matters
- What the learner does between classes is as important as what they do in class
- We have to rethink assessment'.

---

37 IEEE Spectrum – How Online Learning Kept Higher Education Open during the Coronavirus Crisis. https://spectrum.ieee.org/tech-talk/at-work/education/how-online-learning-kept-higher-ed-open-during-the-coronavirus-crisis.amp.html

38 TeachOnline.CA – Five Key Lessons learned from Faculty and Instructors moving their Courses Online as a result of COVID-19. https://teachonline.ca/tools-trends/five-key-lessons-learned-faculty-and-instructors-moving-their-courses-online-result-covid-19

3.4 What has been learnt that can be taken forward?

As important as completing the academic year 2019-20 was, it is important to build on the lessons learnt and how one can translate that learning into improving the quality of teaching into the future, not just for the next academic year but beyond the pandemic.

An article[39] on QS.com from April 2020 suggested 'five lessons the higher education sector can learn from the Coronavirus crisis'.

- *The importance of online platforms*
- *The value of international mobility and partnerships within higher education*
- *The role nature can play in the higher education experience*
- *The value of community*
- *The importance of having up-to-date technology*

An article[40] from an April 2020 edition of *Inside Higher Education* made the following three predictions about Teaching and Learning after COVID-19:

- 'Blended learning will dramatically Increase
- Online education will be a strategic priority at every Institution
- Existing and potential online programme management partnerships will be rethought'

In an article[41] on *QS.com* in June 2020, the author stresses the importance of universities rethinking their approach to online learning and what institutions can do to improve their online learning capacity and suggested:

- **Conducting an assessment** - The first step 'in improving an institution's online learning capacity is to review your current offering'. This will help to identify 'your institution's strengths and weaknesses as they currently stand and use these insights to make enhancements'.

- **Increasing engagement** - The article notes that it is 'not enough to simply have online learning platforms and tools to hand. To get the most from online learning offering, efforts must be made to encourage maximum engagement from both staff and students. This means offering guidance to help participants navigate these tools and utilise the functions that require active engagement'.

- **Moving beyond education** – the article notes that 'In addition to teaching and learning resources, online learning environments can also host a range of necessary student services. It is important that an institution works hard to transfer important resources online, adapting these services so that they function effectively in their new environment'. The authors note that 'as one in three first-year university students worldwide reports having a mental health issue, it is critical that students can access the mental health supports they need when access to campus is limited. Other services such as academic advising and study skills must also be transferred online, so that remote students are supported in all stages of their higher education journey'.

---

39 QS.com – 5 lessons the higher education sector can learn from the Coronavirus crisis.
https://www.qs.com/5-lessons-the-higher-education-sector-can-learn-from-the-coronavirus-crisis/

40 Inside Higher Education – Teaching and Learning after COVID-19.
https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/blogs/learning-innovation/teaching-and-learning-after-covid-19

41 QS.com – How to rethink your university's approach to online learning.
https://www.qs.com/how-to-rethink-your-universitys-approach-to-online-learning/

A post[42] on the *McKinsey.com* website in April 2020 looked at getting the next phase of remote learning right in higher education and recommended to:

- 'Focus on access and equity
- Support faculty
- Move the quad *(social space)* online, too
- Activate stakeholders
- Invest in cybersecurity to ensure the continuity of teaching and learning'

A piece[43] on the think tank *Brookings Institute* website in May 2020 listed the 'top 10 risks and opportunities for education in the face of COVID-19'. The most pertinent ones for higher education were:

- Risks
  » 'Distance learning will reinforce teaching and learning approaches that we know do not work well'
  » 'Educators will be overwhelmed and unsupported to do their jobs well'
  » 'Poor experiences with educational technology during the pandemic will make it harder to get buy-in later for good use of educational technology'

- Opportunities
  » 'Blended learning approaches will be tried, tested, and increasingly used'
  » 'Quality teaching and learning materials will be better curated and more widely used'
  » 'Teacher collaboration will grow and help improve learning'

4 Conclusions

Internationally, quality assurance agencies were key actors in national efforts to support governments and higher education institutions in the emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

These supports included modifications to external quality assurance processes by dispensing with the requirements for site visits to institutions that were no longer possible due to social distancing restrictions; providing guidance to the higher education sector on how to maintain the quality of teaching, learning and assessment during the pandemic including information gleaned from international sources.

Continental and global networks of quality assurance agencies, higher education institution representative bodies and student representative bodies also contributed to supporting their members by publishing guidance, conducting surveys, organising webinars and collecting and sharing examples of good practice.

QQI contributed to such webinars and also provided examples to peer quality assurance agencies and networks of its experience of virtual site visits for institutional and programme evaluation as well as using the opportunity to disseminate internationally the guidance it had provided to institutions on quality assurance and assessment during the pandemic.

The international experience of how, in particular, higher education institutions had adjusted their teaching, learning and assessment practices over the period March-June 2020 highlights the significant

---

42 McKinsey.com – Getting the next phase of remote learning right in higher education. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/getting-the-next-phase-of-remote-learning-right-in-higher-education

43 Brookings Institute – Top 10 risks and opportunities for education in the face of COVID-19. https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2020/04/10/top-10-risks-and-opportunities-for-education-in-the-face-of-covid-19/amp/

efforts that institutions expended to ensure that students were engaged with and supported during the pandemic. The widespread adoption of blended learning in recent years by most institutions stood to them in the pivot to emergency remote teaching. It was noted that some areas posed more challenges than others, for example, in relation to laboratory components of programmes and in the teaching of the fine and creative arts.

An analysis of the international higher education media output over the period of review revealed a flavour of the challenges that institutions and individual academic staff encountered and responded to. The literature highlights some of the lessons learnt including that elements of the emergency teaching, learning and assessment measures adopted during this phase of the pandemic may be refined and retained as future practice.

CHAPTER 4: FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING SECTOR

Contents

Contents

1 Respondent Context

The findings in this chapter relate to FET including community education and are informed by submissions from twelve education and training boards (ETBs), AHEAD – an organisation which works to ensure inclusive education and employment for people with disabilities, and AONTAS[1], the National Adult Learning Organisation. The AONTAS submission was developed from the National FET Learner Forum, a national learner voice project funded by SOLAS and delivered in partnership with local ETBs. In order to gather data for these submissions, the majority of respondents conducted online surveys of learners, practitioners[2] and academic managers. Other methodologies used to inform the submissions included:

- postal surveys or telephone interviews/surveys with some learners (e.g. on programmes at NFQ Levels 1-3)
- online learner fora
- online focus groups and meetings of staff
- reflective observation reports from FET centres
- case studies
- analysis of routine monitoring data, e.g. from learner feedback reports and results approval panels
- short videos containing feedback from practitioners and learners.

Where the number of participants has been provided, these total 2,501 learners, 990 practitioners and 119 managers. The data gathering was primarily conducted in May and June but some information was also collected in March and April.

2 Change Management

2.1 Approach

Following the government announcement on 12 March that educational facilities were to close, providers began to plan and implement contingency arrangements informed by a range of guidance from QQI, particularly its Guiding Principles for Alternative Assessments.

Provider-level responses were primarily instituted and overseen by existing FET governance groups (e.g. Quality Councils), FET management groups and quality assurance services. In one instance, the executive management team became a 'Business Continuity Team' but for the most part existing structures appear to have remained in place or appeared to be flexible enough to deal with any changes required. In most of the submissions, the process by which these arrangements were developed (e.g. the extent to which staff and learners were involved or consulted) is not reported. However, there is some evidence that these were informed by:

- data gathering from FET centres to ascertain the current status of programmes, e.g. on the extent of work placements, practical work and assessments outstanding[3]
- engagement with leaders and staff across individual FET settings
- exchanges of practice, ideas and expertise across services, to 'co-create' overarching approaches.

One provider considered that a collaborative approach to the "co-production of documents and QA

---

1 AONTAS published its own report entitled "COVID-19 Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Report" in August 2020 https://www.aontas.com/assets/resources/Learner-Work/AONTAS%20COVID-19%20Learner%20Report%20-%20Final.pdf

2 In this chapter, 'practitioners' refers to FET teachers/tutors/instructors.

3 One respondent also referenced a needs audit of learners to ascertain the extent to which learners were able to access and engage with technology.

processes reduced duplication, increased consistency and helped to maintain the integrity of awards…"

As part of quality assurance measures to ensure clarity and consistency on changes to existing practice, providers developed modified policies and guidelines in specific areas to cover the emergency period. Examples of these included guidance and procedures on:

- online teaching and learning
- work experience/placement
- the development and approval of alternative assessments
- learners experiencing exceptional circumstances
- Internal Verification (IV)
- External Authentication (EA).

An added complexity for ETBs is that they offer programmes leading to awards of multiple awarding bodies. Some of these awarding bodies operate internationally, which led to delays in the issuing of guidance as they sought to respond to local and evolving circumstances in different jurisdictions. These delays, combined with differences of approach between different awarding bodies, proved to be an additional challenge for providers in providing clear and timely information to staff and learners.

There was some variation in organisational approaches to the approval of alternative assessments. Some providers established central mechanisms to ensure consistency of decision-making: others operated a more delegated model, whereby decisions were overseen by FET centre leaders in accordance with an agreed framework. Whilst one respondent noted that perceived delays in the approval of alternative assessments was a source of frustration for tutors, no significant concerns were reported in respect of either approach.

2.2 Technology

Contingency arrangements included the rapid adoption of online technologies. Some providers had commenced the roll-out of virtual learning environments (VLEs) prior to COVID-19 as part of strategic investments in technology-enhanced learning (TEL). Providers and services that had such infrastructure in place considered it a significant advantage in pivoting to online learning, enabling less disruption and greater continuity in teaching and learning activities. Conversely, the absence of existing provider-level policies on the adoption of particular platforms (e.g. communications platforms such as MS teams or Zoom) caused some confusion among staff as to which they should use, resulting in delays in moving online and the use of multiple different platforms.

Access to appropriate devices was frequently identified as a challenge for both staff and learners. Data from learner surveys suggest that whilst the majority of learners had access to a laptop or PC, in some cases this was a shared family device (see Fig. 1). In addition, a significant minority of learners completed their course using a mobile phone, the incidence of which was notably higher for learners at Levels 1-4 and for learners from identified disadvantaged groups. The availability of a reliable internet connection was also a challenge, particularly for providers based in more rural settings (albeit the availability of free data on mobile phone packages proved to be a valuable support). In addition, some programmes required access to specialist software (e.g. payroll, multimedia software etc.) and teaching staff were incurring costs for telephone calls and printing/posting materials from home.

A mobile phone with Internet	A personal laptop (used only by you)	A shared laptop (used by other members of your household)	My work is posted to my house and I post it back when done	No response
122 13.6%	356 39.6%	144 16.0%	30 3.3%	248 27.6%
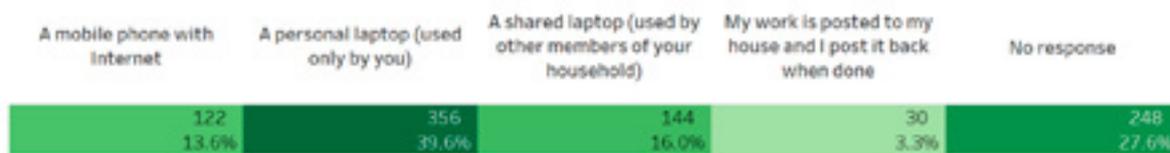
Figure 1 Responses to AONTAS FET Learner Survey question: "What device do you use to complete your coursework?"

To mitigate some of these challenges, providers arranged to:

- loan devices and internet dongles to learners and in some cases procured additional devices for this purpose (although the extent to which learners were offered such supports varied by provider)
- purchase additional software licences or provide open-source software
- procure devices and mobile phones to support staff in maintaining contact with learners.

2.3 Staff development

The adoption of new technologies also required the provision of support for staff in their application. In the FET Professional Development Strategy 2017-19, learning practitioners identified TEL as the area in which they had the lowest level of confidence in their skill levels. Providers used a combination of strategic and localised approaches to support the rapid upskilling of staff. Several providers had previously appointed designated professional development coordinators and TEL coordinators, which proved valuable in coordinating strategic supports such as the delivery of online training opportunities and webinars etc. Providers reported very significant uptake of such opportunities by staff and increased confidence and self-reliance as a result. As with the prior adoption of technology, some providers had previously established networks of 'digital champions' or staff with TEL expertise as part of strategic initiatives to upskill staff in this area. These staff also proved to be invaluable in providing peer support to colleagues in the transition to online teaching, learning and assessment. One-to-one supports were also provided on an ongoing basis by central units such as IT and quality assurance.

2.4 Communications

Communications with staff were primarily conducted via email and online platforms (e.g. MS Teams and Zoom). Providers reported the use of regular virtual staff meetings to provide updates on developments as the situation evolved. Reflecting the large and distributed nature of ETBs, some providers adopted cascade models for the distribution of information, whereby information was communicated to centre leaders who then shared it with staff. The responses indicate that such meetings occurred more frequently than they would normally and staff feedback suggests that they were an important and effective means of staying connected and sharing experiences and ideas. For distributed organisations like ETBs where centres are geographically spread, online meetings facilitated higher levels of engagement from staff (as travel could otherwise be a barrier) and the ability to bring together staff from different services to share experiences was noted as a further benefit. This is a practice that providers consider could be useful to continue post-crisis. There are indications that some staff experienced a degree of information overload and felt somewhat overwhelmed trying to keep on top of email. This may be a reflection of the challenges of a quickly moving situation but consideration of appropriate and targeted communication channels and FAQs may help to avoid overburdening staff.

"The pressure on me as a manager to ensure the continuation of teaching and learning, structure and process, motivation, communications, outcomes and the well-being of both students and staff was a daily challenge." **FET Academic Manager**

Evidence of provider-level communications with learners is very limited in the information provided to QQI. There is some reference to the use of social media and one provider developed a standard communication document for use by centres when communicating with learners, outlining what they could expect and what their responsibilities were. The majority of communications with learners appeared to be conducted at the level of individual practitioners, using a combination of telephone/text message, post, email and online platforms. In some cases, online platforms assumed a greater role when the extended duration of the restrictions became more evident or as staff knowledge of, and access to, technological channels increased. Community education providers in particular highlighted the importance of time intensive one-to-one work by phone.

Similarly, very little information is available on provider-level communications with external stakeholders. There is some reference to engagement with other agencies involved in providing supports to learners and with industry partners to offer education and training supports.

2.5 Conclusions

The immediacy of the announcement to close meant that providers had very little opportunity to plan and prepare effectively for the transition to remote teaching, learning and assessment and in some cases weren't able to implement contingency arrangements and provide guidance as quickly as they might have liked. The speed with which arrangements had to be put in place may have allowed only limited opportunities for consultation with stakeholders in developing responses: however, the existence of representative governance structures and internal stakeholder groups such as learner councils/fora means that there are mechanisms by which providers can seek to include stakeholder perspectives in decision-making during crisis situations. Providers that had previously established TEL infrastructure and expertise, and strategic approaches to the coordination of professional development, found these to be an advantage in making the transition.

The FET quality assurance governance groups (e.g. Quality Councils), FET management groups and quality assurance services provided oversight and guidance for the management of change with the required flexibility. This inspires confidence in the reasonableness of those changes.

3 Teaching and Learning

3.1 Approach

The range of provision, services and learner cohorts within the FET sector is broad and very diverse. The focus and orientation of responses by some providers reflected a continuum of differentiated approaches in respect of particular cohorts and services in accordance with the perceived needs, capacity and goals of the learners concerned. For a significant proportion of the FET sector (e.g. Colleges of Further Education and Training), the introduction of the lockdown occurred towards what is considered to be the end of the academic year. Much of the curriculum had been covered by 12 March and learners were entering a phase primarily dedicated to coursework and assessment. This meant that there was little teaching still to be completed and the focus was on ensuring the delivery of assessments

to enable learners to achieve their qualifications and goals for progression as far as possible. Whilst providers sought to support all learners, those who were working towards terminal qualifications and those seeking to avail of progression opportunities such as CAO offers were identified as a particular focus and in some cases resources were prioritised accordingly.

For other services, the social inclusion dimension of ETB provision – especially at NFQ Levels 1-4 – was a notable factor in the approaches taken in relation to certain learner cohorts and influenced the priorities of FET providers. For these services, the focus was primarily on maintaining engagement with learners and supporting remote teaching and learning where possible. One response noted that for some of these cohorts, "the broader needs of learners outweighed the focus on learning outcomes". In some cases, a small proportion of provision was discontinued.

"Packs of worksheets posted – followed up with a phone call and/or emails … For me, this best replicated the individual attention afforded in the classroom." **FET Practitioner**

Programme instruction continued by email, VLE, digital communications platforms, online video channels, collaborative file-sharing software, telephone calls, text messages and post. Practitioners delivering programmes at Levels 1-4 were more likely to use telephone and post than at Levels 5-6. Low levels of digital literacy among some learners (particularly at Levels 1-3) and lack of access to appropriate devices/reliable broadband posed barriers to teaching and learning via digital channels. In addition, providers found that not all learners had email accounts. Some practitioners reported having to invest time in familiarising learners with online technologies.

Teaching staff adopted a combination of traditional methodologies and new methodologies such as flipped classroom approaches and online quizzes. The use of video tutorials – particularly for the demonstration of practical skills – was widely reported, using tools such as Edmodo, Screencast-O-Matic and YouTube. In one provider, staff delivering education in prison settings (in which online communications are not permitted) supplemented hard copy teaching resources with recorded videos which could be streamed via the prison television channel directly into the rooms of learners.

A variety of synchronous and asynchronous instruction was adopted. Some practitioners established fixed timetables for online classes conducted at the same times as the pre-lockdown timetable to provide continuity and structure for learners. For others, the emphasis was on flexibility and enabling learners to engage with learning on their own terms. The creation of smaller class groups was referenced to ease connectivity issues and accommodate learners. High levels of one-to-one engagement and support provided to learners were also indicated.

"It's hard to do welding only [through] videos." **FET Learner**

Whilst staff felt that some types of content (e.g. theory-based work, assignments and research) could be translated to online contexts with minimal impact, practical instruction and 'learning by doing' is a defining characteristic of much FET provision and the lack of access to specialist equipment or facilities for practical skills development was a particular challenge. Staff and learners attempted to 'make do' with continued exposure to subject matter through video demonstrations, loaning equipment/materials to learners, or learners using their own equipment: however, this was identified as an area in which providers felt that the quality of learning had been negatively impacted.

The impact of the restrictions on the completion of work placements varied by provider. In some cases, placements had largely been completed prior to lockdown; programmes that involve significant periods

of placement in workplace settings (e.g. traineeship and apprenticeship) were more seriously impacted. Where work experience placements remained outstanding and could not be completed due to COVID restrictions, some providers described modified arrangements such as online courses, alternative assessments, or demonstrating learning outcomes (LOs) through recognition of prior learning (RPL) from previous work experience. RPL for that purpose was noted as challenging for some cohorts where placements were required in specific settings or where, as young adults, they simply didn't have relevant experience. Deferral of practice placements was also widely referenced.

Information on modifications to learning outcomes is limited[4]. Where adaptions to LOs are referenced, these primarily related to a greater emphasis on theory as some of the more practical LOs could not be achieved. Teaching staff also referenced having to return to learning gained from previous modules and greater integration of LOs to support learning.

3.2 Challenges

Despite the extraordinary efforts of many teaching staff to keep learners engaged, both parties overwhelmingly **missed the face-to-face interaction** of the physical classroom environment. For significant parts of FET provision, the in-person learning environment is considered fundamental to supporting the development of knowledge, skills and confidence. Learners frequently commented on the loss of opportunities to learn by doing; being able to ask questions in class and get an immediate response; and peer learning and groupwork, where they can share challenges and experiences and receive feedback from their peers. Learner survey data suggest that a significant minority of learners (32% of 738 learners who responded in one survey) were either neutral or did not agree that remote teaching and learning was engaging and effective. Similarly, teaching staff found that remote teaching lacked the richness of the physical classroom and made it more difficult to gauge the level of learners' understanding. It was not possible to replicate the "natural flow of formative feedback" or the opportunities for peer learning and critique, which they consider critical for the development of self-confidence and interpersonal skills and to have a significant motivational impact. Face-to-face interaction is especially important in the community education context, where many learners are from vulnerable and hard-to-reach learner cohorts. Notably, 78% of community education respondents to the AONTAS learner survey would, in the words of one learner, "prefer to return to my classroom as it was prior to COVID-19".

"Classroom and face to face contact normally allows for one to one feedback to learners, and essential support and guidance to quieter learners/those struggling. This is difficult to maintain in digital spaces. Learner supports, personal interaction with hard-to-reach learners, learners with mental health issues and/or learning difficulties, language acquisition are all best acquired in a 'social' (face-to-face) context. " **ETB**

Many practitioners (and some learners) expressed concern at the level of motivation, **engagement** and participation of learners in remote teaching and learning. The majority of learners that responded to learner surveys indicated that they remained engaged on their programmes: however, it is possible that learners who did not remain engaged in their learning were less inclined to respond to survey requests. Similarly, those who were unable to engage in their programmes due to literacy, language, digital skills or IT challenges may also have been unable to engage in electronic survey methodologies. Few quantitative data on engagement

---

4 Feedback on this area sometimes focused on modes of delivery rather than LOs *per se*

are included in the provider responses: however, one provider reported that engagement levels were lowest in unaccredited provision and slightly lower among learners at Levels 1-4 than at Levels 5-6. One ETB reported that in some services "only about one third of learners were continuing with their studies with a higher proportion still engaged but focusing on wellbeing and wider programme objectives".

Social inclusion is an important aspect of provision in this sector and the social side of the learning environment, the interaction with friends and classmates, was frequently cited by learners as the aspect they missed the most. For some cohorts, this dimension was identified as the primary motivation for enrolling on a programme and its absence resulted in isolation, mental health impacts and disengagement.

"I fear the warm welcome, the cup of tea and the face-to-face empathy that is so crucial to encouraging adult learners back into education and training is often lost via technological alternatives for many of our clients or are not even possible for those experiencing digital poverty." **Adult Education Guidance Officer**

Lower levels of engagement were also attributed to:

- learners with low levels of digital skills or learning difficulties who found it difficult to engage with, or benefit from, remote teaching and learning
- learners with poor broadband or unsuitable devices
- challenges in continuing practical programmes remotely
- low levels of learner motivation, mental health and wellbeing
- learners' personal circumstances such as caring responsibilities, home schooling, unsuitable learning environments or concerns about COVID-19
- the period of good weather.

In some cases, engagement began well but waned as the programme progressed, despite efforts from practitioners to 'check-in' with learners. It was suggested that the relationship between the learner and the practitioner is a significant factor in maintaining learner engagement and motivation and the lack of face-to-face connection made this more difficult to sustain as the crisis continued.

"Without the opportunity to plan and adequately prepare learners for such a dramatic change in the teaching and learning process, there was an inevitable negative impact on teaching and learning engagement. There was a sense that everyone was doing their best to 'get through' and 'finish out' etc. but that the loss of face to face interaction (including peer to peer) caused a lot of frustration, disillusionment and distraction and that the teaching and learning process was a greatly reduced version in quality of what it had been when courses were running as normal". **ETB**

Conversely, a degree of improvement in engagement levels was reported in some cohorts as learners gained access to equipment and became more familiar with technologies. The involvement of centre managers and guidance/counselling staff in encouraging engagement was reported as making a significant difference in this regard – although some providers struggled to meet the demand for guidance sessions.

Responses from practitioners, AHEAD and AONTAS suggest that some **marginalised and vulnerable groups were particularly disadvantaged** by the experience of remote teaching and learning. AONTAS

reported that learners in Direct Provision and learners from the Traveller and Roma communities were more likely to rely on a device unsuitable for their learning such as a mobile phone, and were less likely to have a reliable Internet connection. More broadly, learners who had low levels of literacy, digital skills or English language levels, who were unable to access devices/reliable broadband, who had unsuitable or unsafe home environments, or who were unable to work independently, were more likely to struggle with a lack of structure and motivation and were often unable to continue learning consistently or effectively. Some learners also require additional learning or emotional supports to achieve their educational goals and teaching staff reported that these learners were more difficult to support remotely. Practitioner feedback identified that of those who had allocated hours for supporting learners with disabilities, a significant minority were unable to incorporate this role remotely (see Fig. 2). This is consistent with AONTAS learner survey data, which identify that a significant proportion of learners with disabilities felt that their needs were not being met.
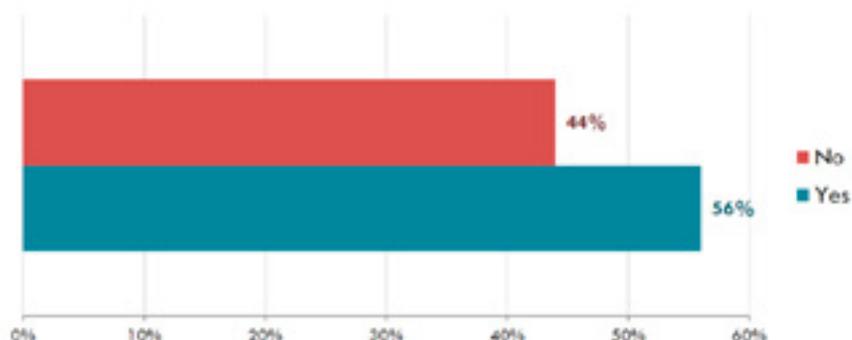

Figure 2 Responses to AHEAD FET Practitioner Survey question:
"Have you been able to incorporate the disability support role remotely?"[5]

Feedback from staff also frequently commented on the **increased workload** arising from creating new content for remote delivery and assessment, engaging with learners via multiple communications channels, and upskilling both themselves and learners in the use of new technologies and methodologies. Practitioners engaged in a lot more one-to-one support with learners which, whilst greatly appreciated by learners, proved very time consuming, resulted in a blurring of boundaries in relation to learner expectations of practitioner working hours, and had implications for work-life balance. Some staff were asked to document daily contacts with learners (for the purpose of enabling follow-up for learners that did not engage) and found this to be very onerous. It was also dispiriting for some staff that despite significant additional effort on their part, learners were still falling behind or not achieving as they might expect. The longer hours and increased workload (for which staff did not receive additional remuneration) also occurred in challenging personal contexts, such as caring responsibilities, home-schooling, loss of family income and isolation.

"I worked about 50 hrs/week. It was so hard. Everything took so much longer. I experienced stress at a heightened level" **FET Practitioner**

---

5 *How COVID-19 is Affecting Irish FET Practitioners and their Provision for Students with Disabilities.* AHEAD, p. 12.

Some staff also raised concerns about some of the **risks** to vulnerable learners (e.g. child protection and internet safety issues) in engaging in online contexts. Challenges in relation to **privacy and GDPR** (e.g. the management of learner data in online contexts and learner discomfort at live video streams into their homes) were also identified.

3.3 What worked well

Feedback from learners on what worked well during this period consistently commended the **availability and responsiveness of teaching staff**, the lengths to which practitioners went to keep learners engaged in their learning, and the level of support and flexibility they received. Many felt that staff went "above and beyond" in helping them adapt to remote learning and this was greatly appreciated. AONTAS learner survey data also indicate that the majority of learners (85%) felt supported to succeed during this period and that their individual learning needs were met (79%)[6].

Learners also identified that remote learning provided greater **flexibility** and control in how and when they accessed programme material. The ability to engage with and complete work at times that suited them, and being able to work at their own pace, were frequently identified by learners as positive features of the remote learning experience.

"I wish to offer my sincere admiration and thanks to everyone across the various ETBs - herculean efforts have been put in to give all students the best possible chance of achieving their qualifications, and I feel being able to continue the course helped keep some semblance of normalcy in otherwise quite stressful times" **FET Learner**

Certain cohorts were very comfortable with the technology and responded well to the online learning environment. Learner survey data suggest that the majority of learners felt confident in their digital skills and ability to learn online. It should be noted, however, that online survey methodologies require access to a device and a degree of digital literacy and may not therefore be representative of learners who do not have these. Both learners and teaching staff also noted that the experience had **increased their digital skills**. For some learners, whilst the transition was initially daunting, they gained in confidence as the experience progressed and consider that the skills they have gained will be of benefit in future – particularly in career contexts. Learners also noted that it has reduced the 'fear factor' for online learning and they would be less hesitant to engage in online learning in future. For example, on digital skills, a learner responding to the AONTAS survey shared that "If I want to move forward I have to engage with the technology, so it's given me a push and that's not a bad thing." Teaching staff welcomed the opportunity to upskill in new technologies and teaching methodologies (although some found it stressful having to do so at an already very busy time). It also provided an opportunity to rethink lesson design using both traditional and new methodologies and to test new approaches. Many staff anticipate retaining aspects of online teaching and learning post-COVID.

Both staff and learners observed that remote teaching and learning required a higher degree of **self-directed and independent learning** from learners. Some settings that normally provide a highly structured and directive learning experience consider that this can pose a challenge when learners progress to other FET or HE programmes "where there is much less 'hand-holding'". The remote learning

---

6 *COVID-19 Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Report.* AONTAS, p. 14.

experience required learners to take a greater degree of responsibility for their own learning and whilst this is challenging for some learners, others found that the experience developed their self-discipline and confidence in working independently. One learner responding to the AONTAS survey reported that "I have gained confidence in trying to work problems out when they arise and pushing myself to figure out a task I'm stuck on."

Other benefits noted in the submissions included:

- practitioners reported that some learners were less introverted, and more engaged, interactive and confident in asking questions in online learning environments than they had been in class. It was suggested that this could be attributable to familiarity with online devices for communicating and the ability to type comments or questions (which also increased interaction between learners)
- the ability to easily access and reference a suite of teaching materials and programme information in a single location on a VLE was welcomed by both teaching staff and learners
- physical limitations in buildings and locations mean that the number of learners some services are able to support is limited – particularly if social distancing restrictions remain the ability to stream classes means that some such services are able to reach a larger number of learners and to offer extended course offerings
- reduced travel costs for learners were regularly cited
- the increase in one-to-one contacts and telephone calls between practitioners and learners helped build individual relationships to an extent that was not always possible in a classroom environment
- learners reported that engagement with teaching staff and learning provided them with structure and a contact point during a challenging period
- staff frequently noted a higher degree of collaboration with their peers, building a greater sense of collegiality, community and camaraderie.

4 Assessment

4.1 Approach

Several providers produced procedures on arrangements for modifications to assessments informed by guidance produced by QQI. Whilst information is limited on the processes by which alternative assessments were designed by practitioners, some providers described consideration or mapping of learning outcomes. One provider established a working group which partnered with the Further Education Support Service (FESS) to provide training to members of centre-based quality assurance teams in how to identify core, regulatory and essential learning outcomes: a case study approach was used to demonstrate how this could be done. However, in some cases, the alternative assessments were largely adaptations of existing assessments and the impact on the assessment of learning outcomes was considered to be minimal.

Providers also describe an element of peer review either by colleagues or external authenticators to quality assure the standard of the assessment. Quality assurance teams are referenced extensively in providing advice and support in the development of alternative assessments (e.g. the production of exemplar alternative assignment briefs and marking schemes in a number of different disciplines and assessment types) and in recording and approving such arrangements.

Examples of alternative assessment approaches included:

- examinations being replaced by a variety of alternative approaches, including open- and closed-book online examinations, assignments, multiple-choice papers and online quizzes

- a reduction in the duration of examinations (e.g. from three hours to two) and a corresponding reduction in the number of questions
- breaking up large assessments into smaller, separate assessments
- assessments involving presentations, role play or skills demonstrations being video recorded (either by the learner or the practitioner) or undertaken using live online video platforms
- radio/audio editing assessments being recorded by learners on their phones and edited at home using relevant software
- learner portfolios/artefacts being presented digitally or photographed and submitted online
- using evidence of skills and learning outcomes assessed in other modules to demonstrate similar outcomes
- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in lieu of (non-vocational) work experience.

Additional measures were also put in place to support the integrity of assessment, including the introduction of policies for the conduct of online examinations, the use of anti-plagiarism software, time limits, confirmation of authenticity, and invigilation by practitioners using live video streaming. Some providers also required learners to provide written statements confirming the authenticity of their work.

Support for learners in preparing for alternative assessments was provided in some cases by providing information on revised assessment briefs in advance, online classes dedicated to preparation at home, instructional videos on alternative assessments, or 'mock' assessments using the same methodology. In some cases, where learners were unable to access assessments online, assessment packs were posted to learners' homes. Providers offered extra time to reflect the challenges of using new technology and flexibility in submission deadlines. Learners who felt that they would be disadvantaged by alternative arrangements were also offered the option to defer. Learner survey data indicates that most learners were satisfied that they had been provided with information on alternative assessments in a timely manner. Through the virtual discussions conducted by AONTAS, for example, learners reported that they appreciated the efforts their tutors had made to accommodate their needs around alternative assessment, with one learner explaining "we were given the option of an assignment instead, and that worked quite well."


Figure 3 Responses to AONTAS FET Learner Survey question: "I was informed about any alternative assessments in a timely manner." Of those who answered the question, 80% agreed.

"Major elements of [Training Centre] courses are practically delivered and assessed, and can be difficult to teach, learn or assess remotely – potentially dire consequences of certifying elements of courses remotely (plumbers, electricians)." **ETB**

The assessment of practical skills – a core component of much FET provision – was one of the areas most impacted. Whilst skills demonstrations were assessed online in some instances, teaching staff considered these approaches to be less effective. In addition, there were many practical areas where specific equipment (e.g. a forge, a printing press), interactions (e.g. beauty therapy, animal grooming), software, or regulated workplace placements were required, which could not be replicated and had to be deferred. In some instances, centres were hoping to complete these assessments either in July when restrictions were expected to ease or in the autumn.

Staff teaching learners on programmes at Levels 1-3 also found it challenging to engage these learners in remote assessment and for some cohorts the majority of certification was deferred until the autumn. This is borne out by QQI certification data, which indicate a significant reduction in certification – particularly at Levels 2 & 3 – compared with volumes for the same period in the preceding years (see Fig. 4 & 5[7]).
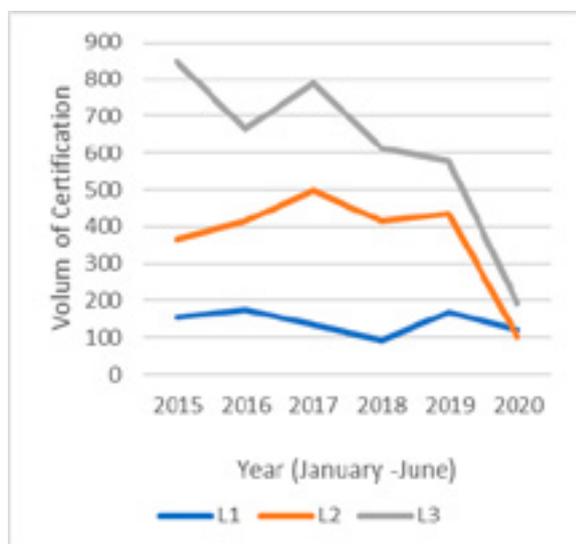

Figure 4 QQI NFQ L1-3 Major Award Certification:
January - June 2015-2020
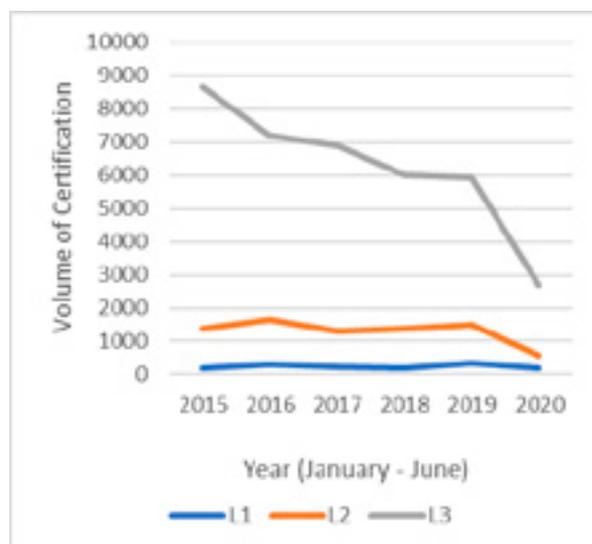
Figure 5 QQI NFQ L1-3 Minor Award Certification:
January - June 2015-2020

Remote assessment also necessitated changes in the arrangements for assessment submission and feedback: VLEs were often utilised for these purposes where learners were able to engage online. Where VLEs were not in use, practitioners reported assessments being submitted via email, text message and post.

Respondents also described significant changes to arrangements for internal verification (IV), external authentication (EA) and results approval processes. Given the restrictions on travel and accessing FET centres, providers frequently described these processes moving online, which required detailed consideration of arrangements, and additional work, to upload and provide access to assessment materials. There is also some evidence of alterations to provider sampling strategies (i.e. the basis on which a provider selects a representative sample of learner evidence to be presented to an external authenticator), including reduced sampling and more risk-based approaches (e.g. focussing on modules where alternative assessments were used, which were delivered by new teaching staff, or in which

7 These data pertain to certification by all FET providers.

issues had been identified in previous authentication periods).

4.2 Outcomes

Feedback on the impact of alternative assessments on award outcomes was mixed. Some learners and practitioners felt that learners had been disadvantaged by alternative assessments and believed that they did not perform as well as if they had taken place in the traditional face-to-face format. Others felt that they were able to perform better, e.g. where examinations were replaced by (less stressful) assignments. Some practitioners also felt that the alternative assessments produced better results than in previous years, reflecting greater learning as the pressure for rote learning was removed. An analysis of QQI grade distribution data within ETBs at Levels 4-6 indicates that at NFQ Levels 5 and 6, there was a higher proportion of distinctions in 2020 than for the corresponding period in 2019[8]. This is more notable for programmes at Level 6. There is less evidence of an impact on grade distribution at Level 4.
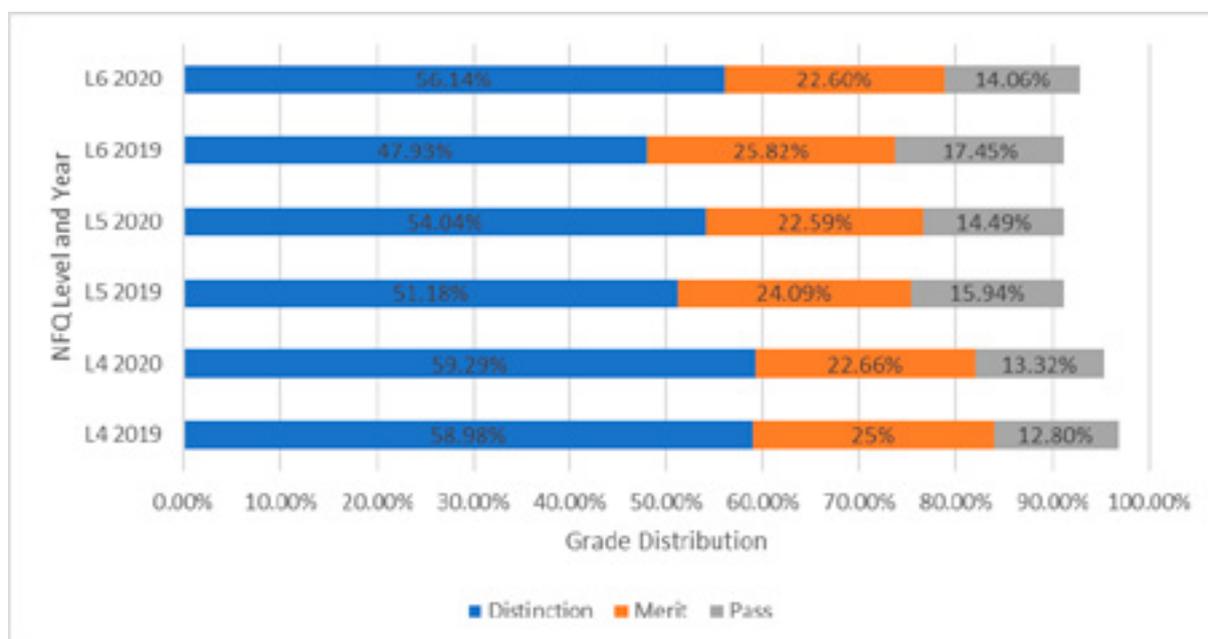

Figure 6 QQI Grade Distribution within ETBs at NFQ Levels 4-6: Year to Date June 2019 & June 2020

4.3 Challenges

Practitioners found the timeframe for the development of alternative assessments challenging as they were approaching the end of the academic year. Some practitioners lacked experience in assessment design and online assessment methodologies and would have welcomed more by way of guidance and exemplars. The time pressure, combined with the additional steps required to approve alternative assessments, delayed the release of assessments to learners in some cases and there were concerns that some learners may then have found it challenging to manage their assessment load. Earlier provision of guidance and arrangements for the development and approval of alternative assessments would have been preferable.

---

8 The analysis compares QQI certification data for the certification periods up to and including June in 2019 and 2020. It does not include data from the additional certification period established for 8th July in 2020.

The uncertainty in relation to the Leaving Certificate, and the subsequent decision to adopt the calculated grades process, also proved problematic for FET providers. Practitioners in FET centres delivering Leaving Certificate programmes were in "unique territory" in engaging in the calculated grade process and some felt that little space had been given to the Leaving Certificate Applied. Staff not engaged in Leaving Certificate provision contrasted what they perceived to be "the 'onerous and bureaucratic practices' around QA guidelines for FET assessments, with the DES's response to Leaving Certificate grading. For some, this showed the 'lack of respect for the professional integrity of learning practitioners in the FET sector'." In addition, some FET learners felt "at the bottom of the list" when there was so much national focus on the Leaving Certificate and queried why a calculated grades approach had not been adopted in their case.

Some programmes use standardised secure assessment instrument specifications, which include secure examinations or skills demonstration assessment types which could not be delivered remotely during lockdown. For some of these programmes where learners were seeking to progress to higher education, arrangements were made for the approval of alternative assessments.

Practitioners also noted challenges arising from measures to ensure academic integrity. Some learners were uncomfortable with recording themselves at home or disliked having to set up measures for online exam invigilation. Practitioners expressed concern at the lack of standardisation in assessment conditions and encountered difficulties in ensuring that learners could be properly observed. In some cases, it was suggested that it was difficult to be assured of authorship beyond the learner's own verification and that it was easier to moderate examinations in a face-to-face setting.

"While every precaution was taken to mitigate against assessment malpractice, there was still some concern around online examinations … particularly in relation to tutors not always knowing whether or not students were referencing their notes/getting help to complete examination questions." **ETB**

Other challenges noted in the delivery of remote/online assessment included:

- some learners – particularly at lower NFQ levels – need a lot of support in assessment and these assessments were not deemed to work as well
- assessment of interpersonal skills was challenging, e.g. group work, discussions, conversations, active listening skills etc.
- aspects of online oral presentations were difficult for learners, e.g. maintaining eye contact/ effective use of visual aids
- some learners struggled with online assessments because they do not type as quickly as they can write and found the time limit challenging where they otherwise may not have
- computer assessments, where practitioners were unable to adequately guide the learner through work online.

Arrangements for submission of assessments also posed challenges in some cases. Some assessments included the submission of large volumes of material per learner (e.g. portfolios) or required the submission of large electronic files (e.g. videos) that were time-consuming to record and upload. In some cases, practitioners had to accept assessments submitted through a variety of channels (e.g. VLE, post, email etc.), which was both complex and time-consuming to manage.

Providers that reported challenges arising from revised arrangements for IV and EA highlighted:

• difficulties with the operation of multiple platforms and IT capacity among staff
• communications challenges
• a small incidence of error arising from a smaller sampling strategy that would have been identified under normal procedures
• delays in timelines for external authentication and the process taking longer than normal, which had a knock-on effect on the availability of some authenticators
• feedback from some EAs and centres suggested that whilst successful, remote EA lacked aspects of centre-based authentication and authenticators did not get as comprehensive a feel for the work of the centre.

4.4 What worked well

Learner survey data suggest that the majority of learners felt confident in their ability to complete their assessments and felt that they were fair. Practitioners – particularly at Levels 5-6 – also commented that many of the written assessments and open-book examinations worked well and in several cases that the alternative assessment was found to be a better assessment instrument than the original. Both practitioners and learners commented that some learners found the completion of assignments a less stressful experience than an examination. Responses from practitioners also indicate confidence in the integrity of assessment although some responses indicate a lack of awareness among practitioners of measures to support academic integrity in an online/remote context. Similarly, although the majority of learners were of the view that the arrangements prevented cheating, learner survey data also indicate an element of uncertainty on this point.
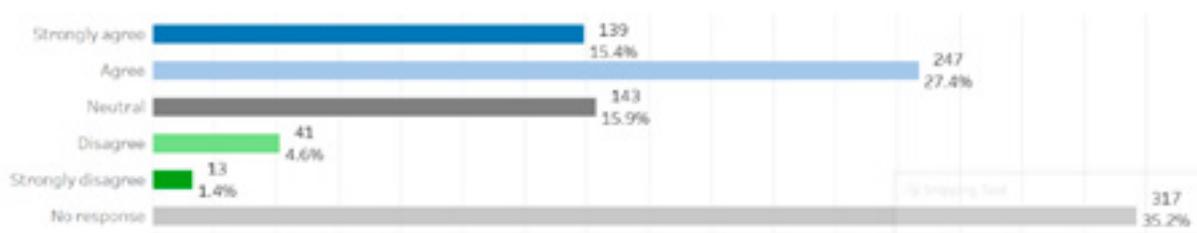

Figure 7 Responses to AONTAS FET Learner Survey question: "I feel the assessments in place will prevent cheating."

Many practitioners found the arrangements for online submission of assessments and tools for the provision of feedback to be preferable to those previously used and would like to retain these practices. For example, the use of VLEs such as Moodle enabled practitioners to easily access and grade assessments and provide feedback. Practitioners also identified that the analytics functionality provided by online quizzes (e.g. using MS Forms or Socrative) enabled tracking of results and the identification of areas where learners were commonly struggling with particular learning outcomes. Similarly, whilst the operation of online internal verification, external authentication and results approval meetings presented some challenges, several providers identified potential for increased efficiency and a reduced environmental impact from the reduction in printing and travel. These are areas that may also be considered for retention post-COVID.

5 Future Considerations

Learner survey data suggest that whilst the majority of learners would continue their digital learning experience next year if restrictions remained in place, they would, overwhelmingly, prefer to be back in classroom, and the majority of learners consider peer learning to be a core part of their learning experience. In the AONTAS survey and virtual discussions, digital learning was described as "lonely" and "impersonal" at times, and learners stated that they missed "learning from each other and not just the tutor, learning from everyone's experiences." In planning future provision, providers will need to consider how best to maximise opportunities for **interaction** among learners and between learners and practitioners. In the event that social distancing restrictions continue, blended learning approaches that combine online components with face-to-face interactions (where possible) may represent a more supported learning experience that better meets the needs of some FET learners. In the event that centres are fully closed again, providers may need to reflect on how to maximise opportunities for interaction e.g. through live video calls/classes, chat and message board functions etc., and for group work and engagements with a primarily social orientation to sustain motivation and to support the development of relationships and interpersonal skills. Learners noted that having had the opportunity to become familiar with the programme, their peers and tutor in a more normalised environment in advance of the lockdown was a significant advantage in making the transition to remote learning.

"We learn more from class discussions and social interaction than anything else. The interaction is part of the learning so this needs to continue somehow." **FET Learner**

Planning for the safe reopening of centres was identified as a key challenge for providers. In the event that social distancing means that centres are required to operate at reduced capacity, providers may need to consider **prioritisation of access**. This may include, for example:

- learners who need higher levels of one-to-one support or face-to-face learning, e.g. literacy & ESOL learners, learners with special educational needs
- incoming learners unfamiliar with the subject, centre or online learning. Relationships between learners and practitioners were frequently noted as a significant factor in sustaining engagement
- learners who need to develop fluency in practical skills and/or require access to specialist equipment/software
- marginalised learners or those with unsuitable/unsafe domestic learning environments.

Consideration will be required as to the **learner supports** that may be needed to support effective teaching, learning and assessment, including whether/how existing supports can be effectively translated to a remote/blended learning context and whether new types of supports are required. Stakeholders have suggested that these could include scheduling one-to-one remote sessions with learners, additional guidance and mental health supports. The challenges identified by providers and learners in respect of meeting the needs of learners will require particular consideration so as to minimise barriers to learning.

In order to mitigate some of the disadvantage to learners arising from the 'digital divide', both staff and learners have emphasised that **induction** processes should include information/training for learners on how to access and use online learning platforms and that learners should also know how to access resources/supports to help troubleshoot technical issues thereafter. Induction processes may also provide opportunities to outline expectations and boundaries in relation to contacting teaching staff,

online etiquette and internet safety. Learners have also suggested that the availability of information on the operation of the programme (including timetabling and contingency arrangements in the event of centre closure) as early as possible would be helpful to support informed decision-making and planning.

Given the extent of the challenges identified in respect of technology, providers may need to consider **strategic investment in IT** to support online teaching and learning in the longer-term. Staff need to have access to appropriate technology and broadband. Learner survey data also indicate a desire for an expansion of the use of online learning platforms[9]. Strategic decision-making on the use of particular platforms across an individual provider may provide greater clarity for staff and enable a more focussed and efficient approach to upskilling staff in its use. Practitioners have identified that the identification of learners' IT support needs at the beginning of each programme may be of benefit in enabling early intervention to address barriers to learning. The availability of supports for learners in terms of accessing devices, broadband and software has also been widely identified across the sector as an important future consideration in reducing barriers to learning if remote learning is to continue.

Practitioners have identified that the lessons learned and knock-on effects of the past few months may require consideration of **programme content, structure and resourcing** for future delivery. A backlog of deferred work experience placements, combined with the potential for ongoing challenges in securing placements, has been noted as a concern – particularly for programmes such as traineeships and apprenticeships with large workplace components. Building in flexibility in programme planning and delivery may enable the timing of particular components (e.g. practical work/placements) to be adjusted over the course of the programme in response to emerging circumstances without necessitating a break in learning whilst ensuring the learner workload remains reasonable – particularly in terminal years. It may be helpful for providers to consider whether any additional supports could be provided to support learners in identifying appropriate placements. Regular monitoring of placement levels may also assist in enabling any particularly problematic areas to be identified, escalated and mitigated where possible.

Whilst some staff and learners have emphasised the importance of timetable and structure, many learners also welcomed the flexibility to learn at times that suit their own circumstances. Consideration of both synchronous and asynchronous approaches to teaching and learning may therefore help to maximise engagement. Clear communication of expectations and goals over the duration of a programme, a manageable workload, and tracking of progress, may also assist in sustaining motivation and supporting learners to pace their work. Both staff and learners have noted that the remote learning experience impacted the pace of learning, which may have implications for scheduling, resource requirements and programme timelines.

Providers have also noted that some course content may need to be updated to reflect the current operating realities of industries such as childcare, hairdressing, etc. where new COVID-related working practices must now be observed. The experience of alternative assessment has also prompted some practitioners to reflect on the appropriateness of existing programme assessment strategies and to consider more integrated and continuous approaches to assessment design. It will be important that any such adaptations be informed by peer review and subject to appropriate quality assurance oversight.

The challenges identified in provider responses in respect of **learner engagement** may potentially be exacerbated in the event that remote teaching and learning extends over a longer period. In informing future approaches to address this, it may be useful for providers to seek more detailed information in this area to determine the extent of, and drivers for, disengagement and the cohorts most impacted. Supporting considerations may include how best to monitor engagement levels (e.g. through VLE metrics) and the resources that may be required to support this activity so as to avoid overburdening

---

9 *COVID-19 Further Education and Training (FET) Learner Report.* AONTAS, p. 26.

teaching staff. Strategies to promote engagement and to intervene and support students with diminishing engagement may also assist providers in this area. As a degree of online teaching and learning is likely to be an ongoing feature of FET provision for some time, providers have indicated that **professional development** for practitioners is required to build on learning to date and further enhance capacity. Many practitioners have signalled that they may retain some elements of TEL post-COVID so such investment is likely to have longer-term benefits. Providers have noted that more creative methodologies may be necessary to sustain engagement online and that consideration will need to be given to online pedagogies and universal design for learning to maximise accessibility. Teaching staff have also suggested that having a local TEL specialist would be helpful to provide peer mentoring. Briefing and training for eternal authenticators may also complement this activity to ensure that the individuals undertaking this critical function remain fully equipped to do so effectively in respect of online assessment methodologies.

The submissions indicate an awareness that remote/online provision poses new challenges for **academic integrity** and that practitioners need to be equipped with appropriate technology (e.g. anti-plagiarism software) and expertise to navigate these challenges with greater confidence and to ensure the continued confidence of all stakeholders in the integrity of awards.

The value of peer support was frequently identified in the submissions, at both practitioner and provider levels, through sectoral fora such as the ETB Directors of Further Education Forum, the Quality Strategy group or the Quality Network supported by ETBI. The **sharing of practice** and the development of case studies and exemplars across communities of practice, providers and on a sectoral basis will continue to help reduce the 'trial and error' nature of some of the COVID experience and provide greater confidence to providers and practitioners in more effective approaches and methodologies.

The delivery and assessment of practical skills, and provision at Levels 1-3, were two of the major challenges identified by respondents and these are areas in which sectoral collaboration may be of particular benefit in identifying effective responses. Some providers also received very positive feedback on arrangements for online external authentication and have indicated that sharing of good practice in this area at an early stage would help inform preparations and training for next year.

CHAPTER 5: THE PUBLICLY-FUNDED HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

Contents

1. Introduction

This chapter is about the higher education sector comprising the institutes of technology (currently 11, all members of THEA), Technological University Dublin (the only TU in Ireland at the time of writing), Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland University of Medicine and Health Sciences and the seven universities in the IUA. In this chapter we use the term institutions to refer to any of these organisations. We use the term institutes or institutes of technology to refer exclusively to the institutes of technology group. We use the term universities to refer to the institutions that are members of the IUA. We shall not refer to any single institution by name in the analysis. Some of the quotations in this chapter use the term 'providers' to refer to higher education institutions.

The findings here are based on responses (received by 24 July 2020) from the seven universities, eight institutes of technology, the RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences and Technological University Dublin. The responses ranged from contingency plans or procedures, to detailed evaluations of the impact of the COVID-19 emergency on teaching, learning and assessment based on consultation with staff and students and academic readiness plans for the academic year 20/21. A series of Quality Dialogue Meetings between QQI and individual higher education institutions that took place during the COVID-19 emergency also informs the findings.

Where responses provided the number of survey/ focus-group participants, these totalled 18,226 students and 1909 staff. In one institution, 1195 of its students responded to the survey which was part of an international survey facilitated by I-Graduate UK which allowed for international comparison. The numbers given here probably underestimate the level of consultation with students and staff by institutions. In some cases, institutions are still at the early stage of the analysis of their data and have only reported some 'high-level' findings to us.

The USI survey data analysis reported in **Chapter 6** is relevant to this chapter. Our secondary analysis of the USI survey data subset on matters relating to teaching, learning and assessment complements USI's report[1] and the responses we have received from the institutions.

The analysis presented here is primarily qualitative. The responses from the institutions varied widely in their scope and format. If a specific issue, experience, initiative, or practice or such like arises in two institutions only one might have considered it relevant to this project and reported it to us. Therefore, the frequency of occurrence of a given issue over the responses may be insignificant.

In this chapter, we reflect the issues, experiences, initiatives, practices etc. that institutions reported either by direct quotation, by paraphrasing[2] or by generalising. An example may be based on a single response or many—often we do not give any indication of frequency. The examples illustrate, they don't necessarily span the range of approaches. This is a preliminary evaluation and not an academically rigorous one.

Finally, to reemphasise, our findings are preliminary and our understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on teaching, learning and assessment will no doubt grow in the following months and years. Also, we could have delved even more deeply into the data we have already collected and may yet do so in consultation with the institutions involved.

---

1 https://usi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/COVID_RESEARCH_FINAL.pdf

2 Some fragments of the original responses will no doubt appear—we simply did not have time to paraphrase ultra-rigorously as this is a preliminary analysis prepared quickly.

2 Change Management in the Context of COVID-19

The focus here is on change management more generally. Later chapters will address teaching, learning and assessment related specifics.

Change management in the context of COVID-19 involved and demonstrated significant leadership qualities at all levels within institutions.

2.1 Approach

The COVID-19 lockdown occurred about a month from the end of the second semester. Only remote teaching, learning and assessment was possible for the remainder of the academic year. Institutions developed contingency plans early and updated them as necessary.

The main goals were to:

- protect the health and welfare of students, staff, and the wider community
- enable students to graduate or accumulate as much as possible of their scheduled academic credit[3] in a timeframe as close as possible to the original
- preserve academic integrity.

COVID-19 induced change management involved:

- contingency and continuity planning including for the next academic year
- communicating with students, staff, and other key stakeholders
- coordinating with external entities
- coordinating and supporting staff in the implementation of change
- adapting systems of governance, management, and quality assurance
- adapting policy and processes
- establishing principles and guidelines e.g. for adapting teaching, learning and assessment to achieve intended learning outcomes in alternative ways
- adapting ICT, library, and other professional services for students and staff
- optimising the use of human and physical resources.

Typically, institutions used their existing management and quality assurance infrastructure primarily to govern change management. They made adaptations to enable rapid responses to the emergency and to allow for operational expediency under the COVID-19 constraints. Senior managers provided strategic leadership. Incident management teams coordinated arrays of functional units. Key committees or teams met more frequently than normal—daily in some cases—to approve adaptations to academic processes.

For example, one institution reported:

> *"The […] Quality Assurance Framework encompasses the structures and processes necessary to assure the quality of educational and training provision under the current exceptional circumstances, and to demonstrate this quality to our internal and external stakeholders*
>
> *Alternative teaching and assessment arrangements have been developed and implemented following extensive consultation with students, academic & clinical staff and the relevant PRSB[4]s"*

---

3 Including for graduation where applicable.

4 PRSB: 'PSRB' means professional, statutory or regulatory body. Sometimes people use the permutation PRSB. In the context of qualifications recognition and the recognition of training, we sometimes use the more focussed term 'PRB' meaning professional recognition body.

Also, for example, one institution described a teaching, learning and assessment continuity framework that it produced to guide the response to the COVID-19 emergency.

"The Framework provided for quality assurance relating to the delivery and assessment of the remainder of semester 2. It provided guiding principles in addition to guidelines for Programme Boards in relation to teaching, assessment, work placement, repeat assessment, exam only students and research students. The Framework recognised that different arrangements may be appropriate for student progression and eligibility for award, and Programme Boards were asked to give priority consideration to arrangements for award years."

Another summarised the overall goal:

"The overall goal of the … Continuity Plan for Teaching, Learning & Assessment is to provide students with the maximum opportunity to accumulate credit by 20th June 2020 in the first instance and subsequently by 31st August 2020, while adhering to all relevant … Academic Quality Assurance and Health & Safety standards."

Typically, hierarchies of committees and working groups were involved in dealing with the coordinated management and implementation of change. Academic councils (or equivalent) were at the top of the hierarchy for the approval of modifications to programmes. They considered topics such as academic contingency planning, academic policy changes, professional recognition body requirements, principles and guidance for academic staff on modifications to teaching, learning and assessment. Some academic councils delegated the approval of modifications to executive committees, standing committees, heads of faculty, school or heads of department.

Devolution of responsibility from within existing governance structures (academic boards or academic councils) was said to facilitate agile, flexible, urgent decision-making and academic leadership. It was described by one institution as a successful innovation:

"Decisions in relation to academic affairs are being taken as follows:

- *The [continuity planning group] for operational issues relating to the organisation of examinations and assessment; related curriculum changes; accreditation; extern examining; mitigation; breaches and discipline; progression; graduation and conferring.*
- *The Academic Leadership Forum (ALF) – for all other urgent academic matters.*
- *The decisions taken are being reported to Academic Board and Academic Council and are subject to subsequent review by them."*

Other examples:

"The Institute's policies and procedures were reviewed in the context of COVID-19 with best practice both nationally and internationally being embedded as appropriate. Minimal changes were made with the inclusion of "sunset provision" as appropriate." (Institution response)

"All Professional Bodies were consulted in the process to protect the Professional Body exemptions attaching to the programmes (ACA, ACCA, CIMA, CPA, ITI and IPAV)." (Institution response)

Programme boards played a key role in adapting programmes to the COVID-19 constraints and typically operated under principles and guidelines established for transitioning online.

The health and safety of staff and students and minimisation of the risk of infection were the top priorities. Award-stage assessments were another priority. Institutions aimed to avoid deferrals of teaching or assessment owing to uncertainty about when things would revert to normal.

It was generally recognised that COVID-19 is an 'exceptional circumstance' that affects the performance of institutions as well as their staff and students, that the nature and extent of the effect varies depending on individual circumstances, and that a certain degree of latitude must be afforded to students and staff.

Institutions did not typically operate in isolation. Institutes of technology collaborated nationally at various levels, e.g. through meetings of the IOT Council of Registrars and other THEA[5] network groups, to share ideas and achieve a reasonable level of sectoral consistency and cohesion. Nevertheless, all practices were not completely uniform across the sector. The approaches taken by universities are similar and were discussed at the IUA Registrars/VP Academic Affairs meetings, which were as often as weekly during the crisis.

As noted in **Chapter 2** of this report a range of guidance was available to institutions to inform their transition to online provision of education, research and related services.

2.2 Information and communications technology

Given that the major response to the crisis was to move teaching, learning and assessment online, technology was central at every level. In this section we refer to the broader role of technology, especially information and communications technology, in supporting the changes. More specific technological topics are addressed in other parts of this chapter.

In preparing this report we asked HEAnet[6] to provide their perspective. We report this in **Chapter 9**.

Institutions were able to rely on their existing information and communications technology infrastructure to support remote teaching, learning and assessment and it bore up well. Unfortunately, as we shall discuss, access was a problem for some users because of their individual circumstances.

A range of different software systems is in use across the sector. Dedicated virtual learning environments were used alongside mainstream video conferencing systems and diverse electronic communications technologies. Email was heavily used. The diversity of software tools not only across the sector but within institutions was striking. Figure 1, for example, was produced by one institution to illustrate the results of a staff survey question on the mix of technologies used for teaching.
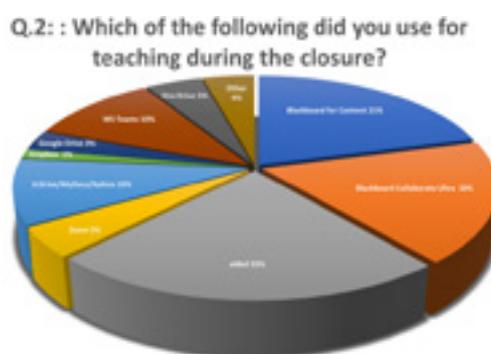

Figure 1 A result from a staff survey in one institution.

---

5 Technological Higher Education Association

6 "HEAnet is Ireland's National Education and Research Network, providing Internet connectivity and associated ICT shared services across all levels of the Irish education system." https://www.heanet.ie/about

The recent USI survey[7] of higher education students found that most respondents were "able to access the online learning sufficiently to complete my studies". The reports we have received are consistent with this. Connectivity was more likely to be an issue than device access, although the latter was an issue for some.

For example, one institution that surveyed its students found that 89% (rounded) had their own PC or laptop and an additional 9% had access to a shared one; it also found that 91% had access to broadband but 67% experienced some level of connectivity issues; 98% of students had access to a mobile phone (with resources to top up). Other examples follow:

"The issue of Connectivity for students from disadvantaged socio-economic groups was discussed at a number of Committees. From feedback, it would appear that academic staff are liaising closely with their students to ensure that students are not disadvantaged by a lack of connectivity. Staff are using creative ways to engage with students in an equitable manner." (Institution response)

"The largest difficulty reported for the students was their access to the Internet/and or a PC/Laptop coupled with inadequate home study environments and in some instances personal issues or caring responsibilities." (Institution response)

"The lack of access to appropriate broadband in some parts of Ireland is well documented. The survey of staff and student access demonstrates this through the question on internet access and also in the text responses of both cohorts when asked about barriers to accessing materials. […] shows that 78% of students indicate that they have either 'average' or 'slow' internet speeds, with 1% indicating that they do not have access to the internet. Staff indicate greater access to 'fast' internet speed at 42% with a further 40% having access to 'average' internet speed […]" (Institution response)

Overall, information and communications technology worked remarkably well for many in supporting the management of the transition as well as in the implementation of online teaching, learning and assessment and related services.

"Teaching staff and management also made use of Microsoft Teams and Zoom to hold regular meetings. Our Educational Technologist made great use of Sharepoint and Blackboard and supported teaching staff to transition to or improve skills on these platforms" (Institution response)

2.2.1 Monitoring online activity

Monitoring online activity of students and staff provided some insights on issues arising, for example:

- *"monitoring online activities with students became important benchmarks for determining the level of engagement with the new virtual campus:*
  - » *virtual classroom engagement*
  - » *students posting traffic to various virtual platforms*
  - » *the number of virtual classes held in the early weeks*
  - » *staff adding content to virtual platforms*
  - » *uptick in daily student logins with some recording significant numbers without technical disruption and others recording disconnection and challenges around access*
  - » *uptake on CPD for staff*
  - » *training for students on how to gain access to new digital support"*. (Department of Education and Skills Data Collection Exercise)

---

7 https://usi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/COVID_RESEARCH_FINAL.pdf (July 2020)

2.3 Staff development and support

All institutions had prior experience in delivering blended learning (involving partially online or remote education) programmes. Nevertheless, moving programmes and modules online was a new experience for many teaching staff[8].

"While the University offers some online programmes, 60% of staff said that they had limited or no experience of online learning. Only 13% of staff considered themselves experienced [...]. This experience was gained mainly through programmes with academic credit or through personal development programmes." (Institution response)

"There were significant variations in the level of supports required by both Staff and Students and this depended on individual contexts. Some staff and students were proficient with online learning while others had little experience to no experience." (Institution response)

Typically, institutions had teaching and learning centres that could help staff decide how to move teaching and assessment online. Website resource hubs provided lists of useful resources to help staff adapt. Some training and one-to-one support was available. At least one institution had planned to increase its use of blended learning prior to the COVID-19 crisis and this had helped.

"During March to June 2020, Academic Practice developed a programme "Adapting our Teaching for Learning Online" to support academic staff adapt their teaching practice for use in an online/ hybrid learning environment. The programme, comprising resources and clinics, aims to provide colleagues with insights and tools to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in an online environment [...]."

"[...] A Digital Teaching and Learning education platform, providing access to digital learning pathways, a discovery tool, digital stories, a digital resources directory, a digital champions network and a digital education forum available to all [...] staff to collaborate on developing teaching and learning. The platform provides a gateway to help [...] staff build digital capabilities and pedagogic expertise, in order to design, deliver and support flexible and online learning programmes. This initiative is led by [...]. Over 3,000 unique users have engaged in the platform to date, since launching online on March 12" (Institution response)

"A series of resources was also developed which focussed on online delivery of teaching and learning (with associated webinar); designing alternative assessment methods; guidance on academic integrity in online and at-distance assessments and using different types of assessments in [...] (Virtual Learning Environment). [...] Teaching and Learning Online Community of 400+ members also actively engaged with issues that emerged in the online teaching and learning context and further resources were curated and shared through this community." (Institution response)

"Ten mini workshops for staff were developed around key areas of online delivery. Four were completed before the COVID19 closure with the remainder scheduled online thereafter."

"The page 'Keep Teaching' was quickly established as a hub for a range of useful links, guides and resources on how to ensure continuity in teaching and assessment practices during Covid- 19 closures. A page called 'Teaching Online' was built and released the week beginning March 2nd. This page links to guides and videos around the practical 'how to' aspects of using the VLE. These covered topics such as how to run effective webinars, how to pre-record content and make it available via the VLE, how to communicate effectively with students online, and how to facilitate collaborative group work online." (Institution response)

---

8 This topic has been addressed by the NFETL document Reflecting and Learning: The move to remote/online teaching and learning in Irish higher education published in June 2020.

"The [… Education Centre …] plays a central role in disseminating best practice guidance and resources provided by national and international bodies. In parallel, […] worked with the Information Technology Department and the Staff Training & Development function (HR Department), in advance of the campus closure, to provide staff training sessions on the use of on-line delivery tools for teaching including Moodle, Blackboard Collaborate, Microsoft Teams, etc. This training is continuing now that the University has transitioned fully to remote working" (Institution response)

It will require more time than we had available for this report to understand the efficacy of such initiatives. One institution reported:

"Staff responses indicate positive feedback on the support they received from the institute – an average of 4.1 out of 5 for the support received in implementing remote teaching approaches." (Institution response)

Naturally, institutions had to support their staff in multiple other ways through this crisis. This support is critically important, but we have not explored it in detail for the purpose of this preliminary report. For example, one institution reported as follows on the maintenance of connections between staff (Figure 2).
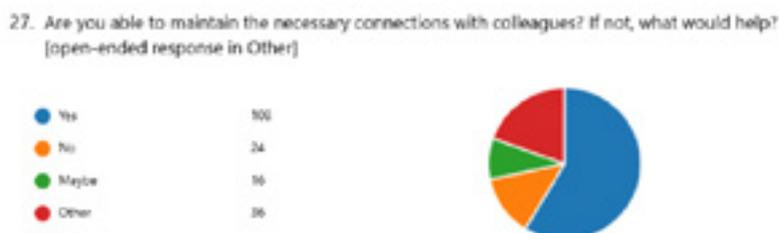
Figure 2 A result from a staff survey in one institution

2.4 Student care and guidance during the emergency

This section is about the care and guidance of students. Other parts of the chapter deal with other kinds of support for students including academic support. The aim here is to acknowledge the non-academic impact of CODVID-19 on students and the efforts institutions made to mitigate this. Our treatment of the issue is not comprehensive.

COVID-19 caused many disruptive changes in the lives of students. For example, in one institution "38% of students stated that they had been made unemployed as a direct result of COVID-19" and in the same institution "43% of all students had caring responsibilities; including 42% of 18-22 year old respondents." In another institution "almost a quarter (24.1%) of the Students were concerned about the Impact on their Future Career".

Another institution found the following (Figure 3) from its survey of its students:

2 Did your employment change because of COVID-19?

|	
Increased hours	391 (11.2%)
Decreased hours	313 (9%)
Laid off/ lost my job	1,511 (43.3%)
No change	1,277 (36.6%)

1 / 4
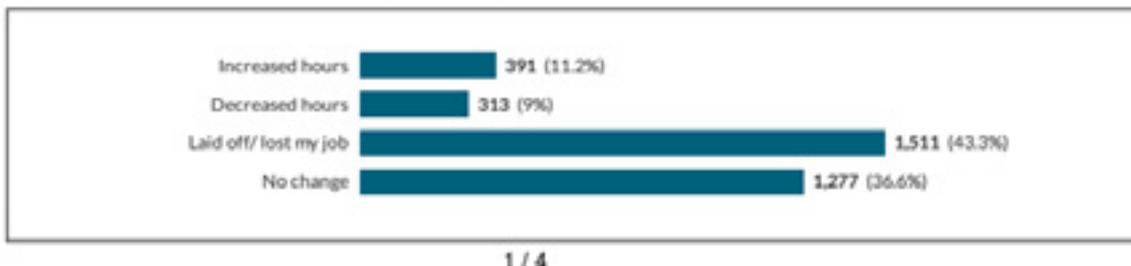
Figure 3 A result from a student survey in one institution.

When asked how they felt they were managing in their changed circumstances, the majority of respondents in the same institution reported feeling some stress or worry (Figure 4).

11 Overall, how are you managing the current situation?

I am managing fine	320 (9.2%)
I am a little stressed/ worried	1,464 (41.9%)
I am very stressed/ worried	1,713 (49%)
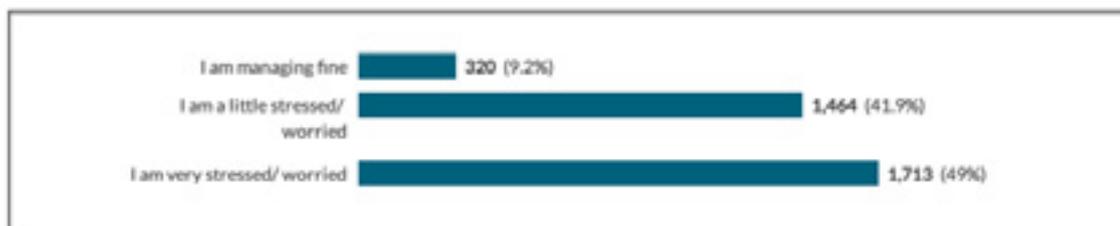
Figure 4 A result from a student survey in one institution.

COVID-19 affected individuals in a range of different ways, for example:

- reduced motivation
- increased isolation
- difficulties structuring and pacing study
- difficulties balancing multiple academic and non-academic responsibilities
- increased family obligations
- difficulties with living conditions
- financial difficulties
- impaired remote learning environment (lack of a space and tools to study effectively)
- distractions
- weakened social bonds and interactions
- difficulties with access to support services
- loss of job or changed (+/-) hours
- stress, worry.

For example, one institution that surveyed a large number of students reported:

"Almost 200 respondents cited that competing demands, ranging from family and child caring responsibilities, work, front-line service, multiple competing deadlines on assignments to be the most significant challenge. Examples of challenges from competing demands for time included,

- *"Simultaneously managing mental health, vulnerable parents, and a work lay-off"*
- *"Managing 3 young children, a new job and trying to manage studies were a huge challenge for me"*
- *"As a frontline worker in a nursing home I found it difficult to manage online lectures as some module lecturers refused to record lectures and or lecture notes"*
- *"Balancing assignment work with extra work given by lecturers was probably the biggest challenge""*

All institutions provide a wide range of care and guidance for their students in addition to academic and technology support. These services were also impacted by COVID-19 and had to adapt, for example

"The Counselling Service also experienced a drop in demand in the week following March 12th, but demand has now returned close to normal levels. All counsellors are now delivering their sessions via video or telephone, and this is working well, but some students do have issues with finding a private space from which to talk to the counsellor. Students who contact the service can talk to a counsellor within 24 hours. The Counselling service has also developed 13 short (2 minute videos) on very useful study survival tips which have been emailed out to all students and are available here." (Institution response)

"The Student Experience comprised fifteen student services which are grouped under five themes: Student Life; Health & Wellbeing; Access & Participation; Careers and Sport and Physical Activity. Almost all services were able to continue to support students by adapting to on-line and telephone delivery." (Institution response)

One institution noted that in response to an increasing number of requests for financial support, the upper limits of hardship funds were increased and there was a simplification of the associated administration making funds more readily accessible to those students requiring them.

"Concerns regarding accommodation from March 2020 onwards were significantly higher than in previous years as were requests for financial support. Queries in relation to extenuating circumstances were lower than in previous years. This could be attributed to the flexible and supportive academic measures which the University put in place." (Institution response)

For another example, the following is a set of results from one institution that had very positive feedback on wider supports for students (Figure 5).

Figure 5 A result from a student survey in one institution.

In the same institution with a high satisfaction rating for support services, here are some comments that highlight some of the difficulties reported by students.

"I received support form [sic] counselling while I was in college, but since the colleges closed that couldn't continue"

"Send out extra support to students for their mental health."

"More information and support on students mental wellbeing as it was a very difficult time in terms of going home to homes that may be toxic, unsafe or lonely."

"More details about financial services available."

"Students first, institute second. Making decisions based on students not waiting for other sources to make it for you and leading students up the garden path in the meantime. Finally having consideration for minority groups such as mature students, learning difficulties and mental health."

"Online communication did not facilitate the emotional struggles students went through during their final months of study - there was very little support in that regard."

2.4.1 International and exchange students

Many international students required financial support to travel or to stay in Ireland and special follow-up. Some students stayed in Ireland, while others chose to return home (over 50% mostly non-EU students in some instances – one institution reported 1,200 of its international students remained in Ireland, another reported most returned home).

National support for non-EU students facilitated visa extensions and enabled COVID-19 payments. Local support included financial, food, medical, academic and a range of social and anti-isolation activities provided by the host institutions.

One institution reported that 51% of the international Erasmus students returned home, but the majority (86%) were continuing their studies remotely. Of the students who were abroad, 73% returned to Ireland, and the majority (76%) were continuing their study with the host institution abroad.

2.5 Communications

An effective strategy for communicating with (remote) students (including international and exchange students) and staff was critical for managing the change process.

Here we refer to institutional communications in both directions: send (to inform, to enquire, to instruct, …) and receive; and to facilitating of the necessary flow of information between people.

"The development and implementation of a clear and structured communication strategy was essential to managing the overall situation and allowing a path forward towards successful completion of the Academic Year 19/20. It helped with streamlining processes, developing fit for purpose alternative arrangements and processes, and also helped reduce stress and anxiety among both Student and staff associated with these." (Institution response)

"The Institute viewed regular, clear communication of the most up-to-date information to both Students and Staff as a key element of its overall response to the Covid-19 emergency. This was led by the Institute President who sent regular email updates with key information about health and safety measures in addition to updates on the current context, ongoing planning steps, and

*when to expect significant announcements, particularly with respect to delivery, assessment and examinations." (*Institution response)

Student unions can be key allies in developing effective student communications strategies.

Communications with students about teaching, learning and assessment and related matters ranged from information about institutional contingency plans or policy changes, to module-level information from lecturers. Institutions used multiple communications channels, some reporting that the effectiveness of different channels varied with the situation. Communications directed to students aimed to:

- keep students updated with what was happening and what was being done by institutions
- make students aware of available information and supports (academic, learning, library, technology, international office, health and welfare, guidance, and counselling, etc.)
- provide students with critical information they needed to progress (e.g. on specific arrangements relating to teaching, learning and assessment, fees, and grants)
- avoid information overload
- provide students with options on repeats without penalties, deferrals and carryover of credit, and progression, to instil confidence in them to engage with assessment.

Any prolonged gaps in communication heightened anxiety. High-level communication was necessary, but insufficient. Timely, regular, clear, coordinated, succinct communications from individual academics with their classes about specific module arrangements was especially important to students.

One institution described how its 'Student Desk' adapted to the crisis:

"The Student Desk needed a way to communicate with students that allowed one-on-one realtime conversations and, on week two of remote working, rolled out Hangout Google Chats with the Student Desk team as a service for students" ...."As of 18 June 2020, the team had logged 1,798 Chats.. .....The number of chats by week also proved useful for the team to communicate with one another and with subject expert Registry colleagues who, on a rota basis, were also at the end of an instant message which has proven to be a really effective way to get the answers required in the most efficient manner"

Communications channels included:

- email (e.g. for providing more detailed information about changes to arrangements for teaching, learning and assessment)
- text messaging which may work better for students who don't check their college email frequently
- institution websites
- virtual learning environments
- online chat facilities
- social media (using institution channels and student union channels).

One institution that surveyed its students about "useful way of receiving information during stay-at-home period" found:

"Communication via [...] email was considered the most useful way of receiving information during the stay-at-home emergency (97%), followed by the Learning Management System, [...], (88%) and the [...] website (74%)

Social media as a source of information was rated considerably less useful, with Instagram rate more useful (40%) than Facebook (17%) and Twitter (16%)"

2.6 Conclusions

We were impressed by the success of higher education institutions at finishing out the academic year under the COVID-19 restrictions within the normal timescale and completing the groundwork for the next year.

The principle of the conservation of essential learning outcomes helped focus minds on what needed to be done rather than what could no longer be done. The time invested by the institutions in the elaboration of intended programme and module learning outcomes over the past 20 years stood them in good stead during this emergency.

The quality assurance infrastructure established by institutions proved crucial in the approaches to change management which inspires confidence in the reasonableness of those changes.

Information technology infrastructure was critically important in enabling rapid change. Without it, this academic year could not have been completed and virtually everything would have ground to a halt. However, resource problems e.g. access to reliable broadband or suitable devices, made remote access a challenge for some.

It was also helpful that institutions have been making increasing use of blended learning approaches. This meant that all institutions had some staff who were available to help support the transition to remote teaching, learning and assessment. This was also noted in the NFETL report in June.

It was clear from the responses that institutes of technology and universities are relatively cohesive groups regularly cooperating with one another at different levels. THEA played a key role in facilitating cooperation among the institutes of technology, brokering agreements, constructively representing the institutes' interests to key stakeholders and facilitating effective communication. Meetings of the IOT Council of Registrars and other THEA network groups were held as frequently as necessary during the crisis. Similarly, the IUA played a key role in representing the interests of the universities and facilitating cooperation and effective communication between them on a range of fronts, including at President/Provost and IUA Registrars/VP Academic Affairs meetings which were held as frequently as necessary during the crisis.

3 Teaching and Learning in the Context of COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis required the modification of any teaching and learning processes that were incompatible with public health guidance. All programmes were not affected equally.

On-site teaching and learning activity ceased in mid-March 2020. Institutions quickly reconfigured in order to complete the academic year online with staff and students dispersed —most working from home and some students in other countries— and interactions between people were mediated by information and communications technology.

The impact might have been even greater had the pandemic struck at the start of the academic year. Happening as it did towards its end made the challenge of adapting teaching and learning more manageable that it otherwise might have been.

In this section, we report on the kinds of approaches taken by higher education institutions, including their students and staff, to adapt teaching and learning to COVID-19, the challenges they faced, what worked well, and our preliminary conclusions. Please note that summative assessment is addressed separately in section 4.

3.1 Approach

Chapter 2 provided a high-level outline of the kinds of things that institutions needed to do to adapt and reconfigure after the crisis first struck. All aspects of institutions' operations and management were affected.

All institutions sought to continue programmes where at all feasible. Mass deferral was not a practicable option because many higher education systems were operating at capacity before the crisis. Some less time-critical activities e.g. some continuing professional development programmes were deferred.

Institutions typically produced principles, frameworks, and guidelines for programme boards (or equivalent) to coordinate the modification of programmes, and for academic staff to modify their modules.

Institutions strove to provide learners with opportunities to achieve the originally intended module, stage, or programme learning outcomes[9]. In some cases, e.g. work-based learning, this was impossible, and the choice was either to defer or to supplement with the best approximation.

Institutions sought professional recognition body (PRB[10]) agreement for any programme changes that might materially affect the conditions of professional accreditation (e.g. changes relating to practice placement).

Institutions used their existing committees (meeting as frequently as necessary) and structures to coordinate the rapid change to arrangements for teaching, learning and related services.

Streamlined quality assurance procedures were implemented to enable the rapid approval of modifications. In some cases, academic councils delegated authority for the approval of modifications. In some cases, external examiners were involved in approving modifications.

Automatic or blanket approval for certain kinds of requests that would normally involve a case-by-case decision-making process e.g. extension of deadlines for dissertation submissions, allowed staff and students to focus on the most important challenges.

Many higher education programmes extend over several years and conditions for progression from one year to the next are prescribed by programme regulations. Some of these conditions were relaxed in the context of COVID-19. For example, failed second semester modules would not be a barrier to progression provided the overall average grade was at least a pass and the module was not one where compensation was forbidden e.g. for professional accreditation reasons.

Understandably, many staff and students were not prepared for the abrupt transition online. Converting a 5- or 10-credit higher education module designed largely around in-person campus-based interactions to one that is optimised for remote provision is a complicated task that may take a considerable amount of effort depending on the nature of the module. There was little time for that in March 2020. The crisis gave staff and students an opportunity to try out online learning ideas they may have been thinking about or to try new things. It did not give them the time to optimise their approaches. For example, in one institution:

> *"When asked how they felt about moving to remote teaching, learning & assessment, both staff and students indicated a range of feelings from being excited to being upset and resigned to it 59% of staff [...] and 46% of students [...] indicated positive feelings about the move."*

---

9 The term 'learning outcomes' was not explicitly addressed in all responses though.

10 Professional recognition body. We also use the QAA UK term 'PSRB' meaning Professional, Statutory or Regulatory body.

Institutions replaced in person or face to face teaching and learning opportunities with synchronous[11] (e.g. Zoom or Teams classes etc.) and non-synchronous alternatives (e.g. documents, slides sometimes with audio commentaries, video recordings of lectures, discussion forums, and many others). For example:

"to a large degree staff experimented with and used the tools in their online delivery, as evident from the appreciation for the ability to record lectures, to conduct group Q&A sessions, to facilitate 'drop in' sessions for students, the use of the Polling function, group presentations, annotating slides, reaction mechanisms, class discussion on Collaborate, breakout sessions, chats, live recording, screen sharing, and PowerPoint voice- over. During the emergency period staff used technology to substitute for specific face-to- face activities, e.g. recordings in lieu of classroom lectures but the overall use of technology during this period was not perceived as a good substitute for face-to-face teaching and learning." (University staff survey response)

We will not list here the plethora of techniques and tools used for online teaching and learning. Some examples will suffice.

"The most preferred options for teaching and support were for pre-recorded video or screencast (69-72% of UG students by year). Fewer students rated live broadcast as highly. Teaching materials delivered through Word or PowerPoint were rated highly by 52-62% of UG students, approximately the same as preferences for PowerPoint with audio recording." (Institution response)

One institution asked staff "If you delivered lectures asynchronously, what technology did you use? (please select all that apply)" Figure 6 illustrates the response.

Multi answer: Percentage of respondents who selected each answer option (e.g. 100% would represent that all this question's respondents chose that option)
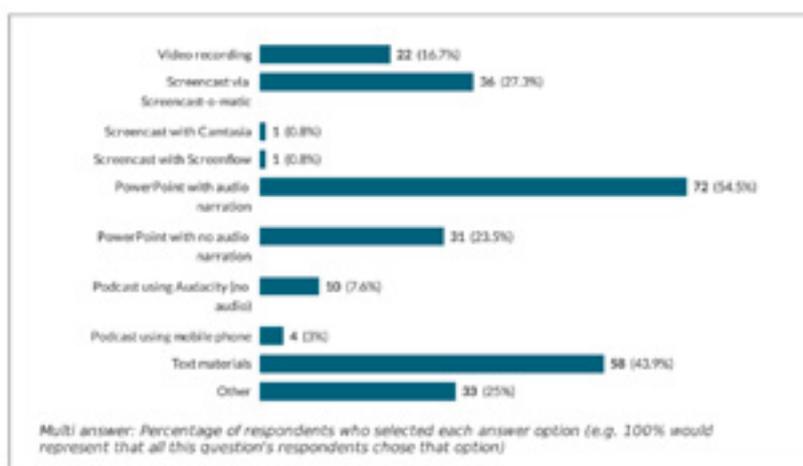
Figure 6 If you delivered lectures asynchronously, what technology did you use? (please select all that apply). A result from a staff survey in one institution.

---

11 The term 'synchronous' means live e.g. a meeting on a video conferencing platform. It means that those involved in the activity can interact with each other at the same time. Everything else is non-synchronous.

In exceptional cases some practical training could be offered but this was rare. For example:

"In the past decade the University has invested significantly in simulation-based training across the health professions at undergraduate and postgraduate level, most recently in the development of state-of-the art clinical simulation facilities […]. Despite the current 'lock-down', some on-site simulation training is continuing. For example, a training course on conducting emergency laparoscopic ('keyhole') surgical procedures while wearing personal respirators and full PPE equipment took place at […] in early April 2020." (Institution response)

Many taught graduate degree programmes and honours bachelor degree programmes involve the production of a thesis or dissertation. Extension or change of project to one that could be pursued online (sometimes referred to as a 'dry project') were among the options in these cases.

3.1.1 Supporting student learning

The focus here is on support for learning, other kinds of supports are addressed elsewhere in this report.

The COVID-19 emergency required institutions to continue supports for student learning under the new operating conditions and for those supports to address consequential changes in student needs for learning support.

In addition to the more general supports described in section 2, the institutions reported a wide variety of measures to support student learning[12]. For example:

*   providing virtual learning environments (VLEs)
*   helping students navigate VLEs
*   providing learning resources including a variety of synchronous (real time) and non-synchronous materials
*   facilities to enable students to ask their lecturers questions e.g. virtual office sessions with lecturers
*   online chat rooms to facilitate interaction between peer students
*   induction for incoming students
*   virtual desktops for students who need specialist software
*   virtual appointments with one-to-one support services
*   remote academic writing support, maths support
*   remote access to e-books, e-periodicals, databases
*   remote access to library books through the postal service
*   remote academic mentoring
*   remote learning-to-learn supports.

Here is a selection of examples:

---

12 The reader may not assume that all of these were reported by each institution.

Did you try any specific approaches to engage students / support students online? (please select all that apply)
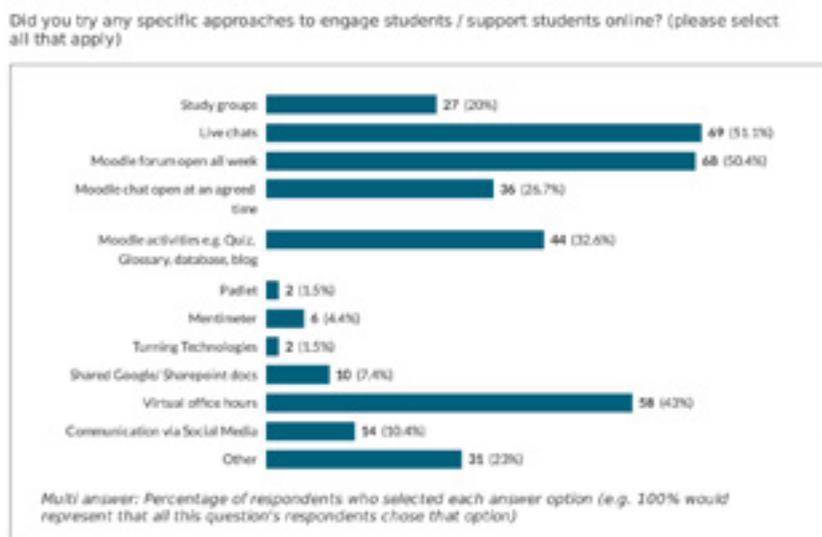
Figure 7 A result from a staff survey in one institution.

How did you provide feedback to students on their learning during this semester? (please select all that apply)
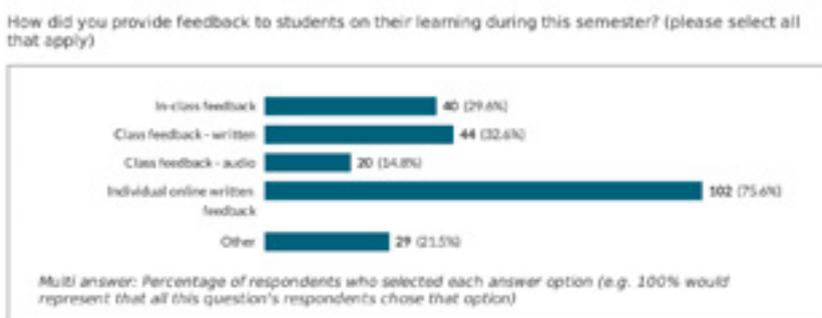

Figure 8 A result from a staff survey in one institution.

"On closure of the college, the Access and Disability Service moved all academic tutoring and learning support online. Assistance with structuring assignments, proof reading and editing, research advice and guidance, referencing support, study skills and exam preparation were all provided to students via Microsoft Teams and phone calls. A team was created on Microsoft Teams for learning support staff so that best practice could be shared. Additional assistive technology was allocated to students that would usually use Read/Write Gold software on campus. Academic staff were provided with details of students with additional time accommodations for assessments, and students requiring alternative exam accommodations were contacted and facilitated by the Access and Disability service." (Institution response)

"The Assistive Technology service is supporting students by phone and email. Also, by remote desktop access and Blackboard Collaborate for student AT sessions. There is a new mobile apps page on the … AT Website." (Institution response)

"Both staff and students cited staff support of students as a positive feature of the period of closure. Students indicated that staff could be contacted by email and that staff put effort into enhancing

learning materials as they were migrated to the remote environment. Staff also cited peer support through assistance from colleagues, staff in support units [...]." (Institution response)

3.1.2 Research degree programmes

The COVID-19 emergency disrupted research students to varying degrees. Some students lost access to experimental facilities. Some students could catch up on literature reviews, write up articles for publication or parts of their theses. Some could continue to work remotely on other research activities that did not require their being on campus. Some will need to extend their registrations to make up for lost time. However, supervision continued remotely, and institutions continued to pay research stipends. **Chapter 7** covers research and research degree programmes in some detail.

3.1.3 International students, exchange students

From a teaching and learning perspective, international and exchange students required additional consideration.

COVID-19 led to some students returning to their countries of origin to complete the academic year online. Naturally, this was extremely disruptive and expensive for the affected students and the quickly changing COVID-19 situation meant that far less notice could be given than would normally be acceptable.

For some, differences in time zones complicated participation in any synchronous activities. Some returned to countries that implement internet censorship.

Arrangements for exchange students were also potentially more complicated depending on the situation.

> *"Where Erasmus students and those on exchange were disrupted in their studies provisions were made across Schools, Colleges and Programme Boards to ensure that their progression was not impeded as a result of those circumstances."* (Institution response)

3.1.4 Transnational provision

Transnational programmes involve additional complexities, not least because they involve operation across two or more different regulatory environments and because the time evolving COVID-19 impact varied by country. One institution with extensive transnational collaborative provision outlined their approach on a case-by-case basis in their response for this project.

3.2 Challenges

While the achievements of the higher education sector are impressive as is the level of positivity of many students about their experience, there were notable challenges to be faced and some level of dissatisfaction.

Moving teaching online virtually overnight was challenging for institutions whose programmes involve a substantial proportion of on-campus teaching and learning activity. Modifying programmes in such a short period to suit all learners was especially difficult and certain groups were more likely to be affected in certain situations than others. Groups that were more affected include students or staff with certain disabilities, those with poor internet connectivity or without access to suitable devices, and those whose individual circumstances made remote working or learning more challenging.

In the context of online teaching and learning, some of the challenges faced by staff and students stem from their being forced by events to transition abruptly to online learning while not fully prepared and relatively inexperienced at operating in wholly virtual environments. Many students and staff had to adapt quickly.

"While they were more comfortable with at-distance learning than at the start of their Covid-19 transition, over half of students were negative about future online learning (54.5%, n=1,902, Total N=3,489)." (Institution response)

"The University runs [a] module satisfaction survey […] each calendar year. When comparing the indicators for the last time that the [survey] was run (October 18) students have indicated that they are less satisfied than recent University trends for this indicator. While this is to be somewhat expected in the current circumstances, the module satisfaction survey will be closely monitored to see how student satisfaction has recovered." (Institution response)

"…, the additional workload on staff and students was cited by many as a particular issue. Students cited examples of where an inconsistent approach to content delivery was experienced across modules within the same programme. Students indicated the need for both staff to know how to use the tools of the VLE better but also that they needed more support in their use. They were also concerned about missing practical and placement modules." (Institution response)

"Between 24-29% of UG students by year reported being significantly behind or not studying at all during March-April 2020." (Institution response)

"74% of respondents agreed that they had to learn new skills to complete their studies during semester 2, while 65% of respondents considered that they had an increased workload as a result of changes made to assessments during the covid-19 emergency restrictions"(Institution response)

"65% of students agreed that they feel they have not learned as much in semester 2 as they had in semester 1" (Institution response))

"83% of respondents agreed that they sometimes felt overwhelmed with their studies during the stay-at-home period, and 78% agreed that they found structuring their study time in an online environment to be challenging." (Institution response)

Loss of access to the campus, while unavoidable, was challenging for many and for multiple reasons. The following quotation is from an institution where the on-campus experience is especially important because of the nature of the disciplines involved:

"The first theme that very clearly arose was the importance of the physical campus to students' perception of their learning. Students talked about learning in a 'two-dimensional' world where they weren't able [to] utilise their skills as visual, oral or aural learners. This was particularly challenging for those in a creative discipline. However, the importance of 'place' was expressed by students from both faculties. Students spoke about how not being in an 'academic space' that facilitated study hindered their own academic performance." (Institution response)

For example, one institution's staff were asked "Was there anything that made the move to remote teaching and learning challenging for you?" Figure 9 illustrates the responses.

I had no problems — 15 (9.9%)
Poor wifi — 21 (13.9%)
Lack of equipment e.g. no work laptop — 32 (21.2%)
Lack of remote teaching and learning skills and experience — 62 (41.1%)
Lack of time to learn the new skills required — 76 (50.3%)
Lack of support to learn the new skills required — 33 (21.9%)
Dislike of remote teaching and learning — 32 (21.2%)
Challenge of trying to support students in the digital environment — 77 (51%)
Personal circumstances associated with working from home e.g. pressures around home schooling, caring responsibilities etc — 63 (41.7%)
Other — 41 (27.2%)

Multi answer: Percentage of respondents who selected each answer option (e.g. 100% would represent that all this question's respondents chose that option)

Figure 9 A result from a staff survey in one institution.

Motivation was a significant challenge for students. In the USI survey cited earlier more than 75% of students selected it as one of the obstacles they faced. One institution that surveyed a large number of its students reported:

"Only 40% of respondents considered that they felt motivated to complete their modules to the best of their ability" (Institution response)

"The second most frequently cited challenge noted by students was an experience of a lack of motivation to study during the COVID-19 emergency restrictions, with over 400 students noting feeling motivated to study as a primary challenge. Examples of the comments relating to motivation include,

- *"Finding the motivation and mental strength to complete assessment as if nothing had changed although there is a major pandemic going on"*
- *"Having the motivation to do it when you don't have to physically be present in class"*
- *"Took all the fun out of university and left me with a screen and unmotivated to do my best "*
- *"My biggest challenge was having lack of motivation in doing the work because I was not in college. My routine was uprooted."* (Institution response)

Access to a quiet place to study was a challenge for some students. Some examples:

"Just over half (53%) of respondents agreed that they had access to a quiet space to study. Challenges in relation to study space and the availability of reliable internet were among the most frequently cited challenges for students when asked about their biggest challenge in managing their academic studies during the covid-19 emergency." (Institution response)

"About 40% of students said their access to a suitable space to study is fair or poor." (Institution response)

Finding alternative ways of achieving the originally intended module, stage or programme learning outcomes (LOs) was especially challenging for some kinds of learning outcomes, for example those associated with placements or practical work. One institution asked staff and students "to indicate

if they believed that the learning outcomes of modules were achieved". 86% of (218) staff, and 57% of student respondents believed they were. Where LOs were not achieved staff cited "concerns for placement, practical skills and performance modules". Overall institutions seem to have coped with the challenge of finding alternative ways of enabling students to achieve the intended learning outcomes. For example, one institution asked staff if they had made "significant changes to the educational goals (learning outcomes) of your courses/modules" Seventy-nine percent of (147) staff answered 'no'. Another institution reported that "The vast majority of learning outcomes will be achieved for award years. In non-award years learning outcomes not achieved will be addressed in subsequent years of the programmes".

We would ask the reader to keep in mind, when reading the list of challenges that can arise, that overall, many staff and students felt that teaching and learning worked well in the circumstances.

The listing identifies challenges that can arise. Some may be common and others rare. In any given situation it is possible that few or none arise. The value in identifying them is that they can assist in reflection on future practice.

Interactions
- People found it harder to maintain a sense of engagement and community.
- Some staff felt that the "experience of teaching and learning was diminished". The interaction dynamic between the students and teacher was the key issue and synchronous teaching and learning was not always possible (connectivity and time zone spread).
- Engaging and motivating students could be more difficult.
- Real time engagement with students in multiple time zones could be problematic.
- Not being able to meet face to face made supporting students more difficult.

Technology
- Perceived limitations of some virtual learning environment tools in certain situations.
- Difficulty securing necessary access to systems for guest or casual lecturers.
- Prerecording material could be time consuming and stressful.
- Access to broadband or computing devices or was a challenge for some students and staff.
- Delays assembling additional resources on VLEs or websites.

Pedagogy
- Adapting pedagogy to remote teaching and learning in the time available.
- Time limited what new skills staff could learn and apply.
- Staff who were not prepared for converting their modules to fully online or who lacked the confidence and experience to engage in fully online teaching.

Restrictions
- Lack of access to campus resources such as laboratories, workshops, studios, theatres and other specialised facilities, specialised software, printed collections) was especially challenging for some.
- The inability to complete work placements was especially challenging for some unless e-working arrangements were enabled.
- Lack of access to hands-on fieldwork.

Some students:
- felt that consistency and coordination between modules could have been better
- wanted more interaction in their online learning experience to help them better engage with the material
- found group work more difficult online

- felt the COVID-19 pandemic affected their learning negatively
- worried about not getting the same learning opportunities, or how their grades would be affected or not being able to see classmates or talk to lecturers
- were not sure what was expected of them
- considered they were not prepared to engage in online learning
- felt isolated
- felt their teachers needed more training to teach remotely
- missed the structure of a timetable – with scheduled release of material to help pace their learning
- interacted less with peers after the transition
- had inadequate home study environments
- reported excessive workload (e.g. 40% in one institution's student survey)
- did not have recordings available to them of some synchronous sessions.

Professional recognition bodies
- Whilst many professional recognition bodies were content to rely on the assurances of institutions that learning outcomes had been demonstrated, some were uncompromising about requirements in the initial stages.

Staff workload
- Some staff reported increased workload (e.g. 79% of respondents in one institution's staff survey).
- Some perceived an inequitable workload share among staff.
- Impact of the extra work on other academic staff duties such as academic research.
- Difficult situations that need to be handled on a case-by-case basis.
- Remote working can be slower for certain kinds of activities. It reduces the opportunities for informal or happenstance meetings.
- Managing timetabling at short notice.
- Uncertainty about how the COVID-19 restrictions would evolve.

Library, copyright and data
- Access to literature that was not available in electronic form.
- Copyright issues in respect of the distribution of teaching materials online.
- Data protection issues.

Individual circumstances
- Students or staff whose personal circumstances changed as a result of COVID-19 in a way that affected their capacity to study or work remotely.
- Distractions while working or learning remotely could be challenging.
- Students or staff who were required to work in healthcare.
- Some observed that weaker students may have been more disadvantaged.

3.2.1 Student engagement in a little more detail

From the USI survey, we see that engagement between students and their teachers seems to have been adequate with most students (60.2%) agreeing (or strongly agreeing) that they had opportunities to engage with their tutors during the COVID-19 crisis.

Nevertheless, maintaining learner engagement was definitely one of the challenges of moving teaching and learning online at short notice.

While some kinds of student-staff engagement were reported to be improved by the move online, some staff expressed concern about reduced "student participation" in live activities. Some staff found it harder to interact with students online. Some students cited the need for more interaction. The following

example from one institution illustrates some of the issues that can arise.

"Students repeatedly referred to their need for more interaction within the online learning environment. The following comments illustrate the different perspectives:

- *Provide online lectures for all modules, not just for some. Hearing a lecture through the professor is more efficient than just reading through slides.*
- *Provide much more teaching.*

Students also wanted a more interactive experience. For some students not having the interaction impacted on their ability to concentrate and sustain their studies:

- *offer online classes in real time as opposed to just posting them up for us to listen to whenever we want. This is because it feels a lot more lonely."*

Another institution that reported evidence of high levels of student/staff interaction and engagement from surveys during the crisis noted that some students didn't engage:

"While Lecturing staff had direct contact with students and continued with remote teaching and learning, there were reports that not all students engaged with the process. It is also noted that weaker students did tail off somewhat and the absence of face to face support may have impacted this category of students to a greater extent."

Another institution asked both students and staff how the emergency transition to remote teaching and learning impacted student engagement in the second semester. In both cases the overall view was that the impact was significantly more negative impact than positive.

Within institutions or even programmes consistency could be a problem, for example.

"The feedback from students indicated that some staff were extremely engaged and went 'over and above' to help students through the process while others were rarely available, often didn't respond to emails and demonstrated little flexibility." (Institution response)

3.2.2 Other ideas

Staff and student surveys by institutions identified opportunities for improvement as well as some ideas for addressing them:

- improve the quality and quantity of interaction between teachers and students
- develop "interactive approaches so that students feel part of a connected learning community."
- increase access to the library and other learning resources
- provide "clear expectations about student participation in online classes"
- provide more training and support (including peer support) for staff to use VLE technology.

3.3 What worked well

This section is about what worked well from a teaching and learning perspective. There are many positive teaching and learning reports to select from. Many students were positive about the efforts made by their institutions. In some cases, this experience has revealed better ways of doing things. It has given some staff an opportunity to try out online learning approaches for the first time and become acquainted with its possibilities.

Some found innovative ways of addressing the challenges mentioned in the preceding section. This highlights the benefit of openness and sharing ideas and experiences.

When reading this section, keep in mind that an approach that may be highly effective for a given module with a given group of students, may be ineffective for a different module or a different group of students. For this reason, we will not list specific approaches as having been found to be 'effective'.

In broad terms moving teaching online worked well overall in the circumstances. For example:

"A significant majority of Students (75.8%) were Satisfied with [the institution's] Response to Covid-19. [The institution] outperforms Global Benchmark in all Five overall parameters [...]." (From a survey of 1195 of the institution's students)

"Empowering academics to develop, be flexible and creative in delivering content, managing assessments examinations to enable the leaners to achieve the learning outcomes worked very well. This also provided an opportunity for more engagement with staff as part of working groups as we searched for solutions." (Institution response)

"Overall [...] transition to learning at-distance was rated highly, (58.5%, n= 2,454; Total N=4,195) of [student survey] respondents considered it good or excellent. Just over a quarter (28.8%, n=1,208; Total N=4,195) considered it average. Just over ten percent (12.7%, n=533; Total N=4,195) considered it poor or terrible. [...]" (Institution response)

In some cases, going online improved things. For example:

"In response to the question what worked well? several schools reported having received positive feedback from students on the online experience. One school felt that some students reported better interaction with some staff in the virtual environment, a few others advised that student engagement with live online lectures via Blackboard worked well, and in some cases, it was felt that students were more engaged with online than with traditional modes of delivery. A few respondents commented that students were willing to adapt and be flexible." (Institution response)

"In response to covid-19 restrictions a number of activities related to teaching, learning and assessment were moved to online. A number of these modifications have been considered as so positive that the Institute may consider continuing them going forward eg. Student Special Circumstances and Appeals processes completed through online." (Institution response)

"I lean't [sic] more from the online recorded classes than any lecture I attended in [...] by a mile. I was able to pause and get my head around hard slides, and look up more information before jumping to the next point. It has absolutely solidified my thinking that having to trek out to [...] was a colossal waste of time, espically [sic] coming up to quizzes and exams where time was precious. I appreciate there are very solid arguments for group learning and the social aspect of leaning in lecture halls with the class. But the shear [sic] volume of work means that I am willing to sacrifice this aspect, stay at home and study." (Institution response - student feedback)

"In some courses, students had access to a much wider collection of online material as lecturers prepared a more extensive version of their lecture notes." (Institution response)

Examples of support for staff and students working well include:

"Both staff and students cited staff support of students as a positive feature of the period of closure. Students indicated that staff could be contacted by email and that staff put effort into enhancing learning materials as they were migrated to the remote environment. Staff also cited peer support through assistance from colleagues, staff in support units [...]." (Institution response)

"Interactions with other students for study purposes was considered positive by 63% of respondents,

and 49% considering social interactions with other students as positive." (Institution response)

"The vast majority of students (94%, n=3,152, Total N=3,344) indicated that lecturers accepted their email queries. The majority of students agreed that lecturers were sufficiently prompt in responding (70%, n=2,128, Total N=3,010) and sufficiently detailed in their responses (65%, n=1,936, Total N=2,968)." (Institution response)

Institutions also found support externally[13]:

"We have learned from how other HEI's across the world have pivoted to the online environment and adapted processes from organisations such as, QAA, ICAI, ENAI, TEQSA, Commonwealth of Leaning to name but a few." (Institution response)

A listing of other things that worked well includes:

• THEA and IUA supported sharing information and coordination of approaches
• the move online increased staff and student engagement with VLEs.

Some students:

• found that having a timetable helped them to focus and to structure and pace their studies
• found pre-recorded videos helpful
• found narrated PowerPoint slides helpful
• found shorter videos (e.g. 20 minute) more manageable
• appreciated the increased flexibility of online learning.

Some staff:

• found small group teaching more suited to interactive online engagement
• appreciated being empowered to adapt their modules
• displayed an enthusiasm for enhancing their online teaching skills
• appreciated being able "to work within [academic governance] structures they were familiar with and had confidence in" when amending their modules
• appreciated the increased flexibility of online teaching.

3.4 Conclusions

The emergency transition to remote teaching and learning was not a conclusive test of what can be achieved by online approaches to teaching and learning. Nevertheless, it may have opened eyes to new possibilities and challenged the necessity of some ingrained practices that may have been considered sacrosanct until COVID-19 struck.

This report provides preliminary findings based on responses from institutions including surveys of students and staff. A comprehensive determination of how teaching and learning were impacted would be difficult, and it is yet too early for that. For now, it can be said that in the circumstances the teaching out of the second semester seems to have gone reasonably well in that higher education programmes have generally not been delayed or completely derailed.

The short interval for this study means that we do not know how sustainable some of the emergency measures will be and whether fatigue might increase if these measures were to be implemented over a

---

13 Chapter 3 provides a survey of relevant resources available internationally.

longer time span.

It seems certain now that the academic year 20/21 will have to involve a substantial amount of remote learning but we expect that it will be blended with some on-campus activity and some work placement. Choosing how to use onsite activity to best effect will be critical. The induction of new students and returning progressing students will need to be a priority as will access to specialist facilities and equipment.

The challenges encountered underline the importance of relationships to teaching and learning and that there is much more to online teaching than uploading lectures or posting PowerPoint slides to a VLE – those kinds of things are the easy part; the greater challenge is ensuring the online offering is sufficient to engage students remotely, motivating them to learn by actively doing things individually and in groups and giving them and their teachers mutual feedback. It cannot be underestimated that the institutional resources required to do this are significant.

Support for staff and students is important and there is an appetite for it. For example, where staff in one institution were asked if they would like to receive more training in e-learning, 71% of staff said yes, when students were asked a similar question 52% said yes.

4 Assessment of Learners in the Context of COVID-19

Institutions' academic staff had completed the bulk of their second semester teaching by 12 March 2020. In contrast, much of the end of year summative assessment work remained to be done.

Unseen written examinations normally conducted in examination halls under strict invigilation are a mainstay for summative assessment in higher education and were all cancelled from mid-March 2020. Institutions had to make alternative arrangements for assessing students for eligibility to graduate or to progress to the next stages of their programmes.

> *"Despite the closure of specialist facilities and restrictions to studios, labs and technical supports, the move to online examinations/assessment was a more impactful change than the online teaching component of the activities, where staff could continue to mentor and critique works in progress."* (Institution response)

4.1 Approach

Three overarching principles guided the majority of institutions in the development of their alternative proposals:

- designing alternative assessment methodologies to examinations that appropriately assess programme, stage or module learning outcomes.
- protecting the academic integrity of qualification awarding processes.
- ensuring that students were not 'disadvantaged'[14] by the alternative modes of assessment.

In March 2020 there were calls from some quarters for 'no detriment' approaches to assessment some of which would have been problematic as they sought to guarantee a prior grade average held by the student regardless of assessment that was to follow. USI excelled in terms of the leadership position it took in this debate and the sensible approach it promoted. The nucleus of USI's approach was

---

14 'Disadvantage' here is a term of art that we shall return to later in this section.

"A core consideration for SUs to work with their institutions on is that all circumstances that may affect student performance in assessment are taken into account at the appropriate board (ordinarily examinations board or equivalent) and in doing this, this is taken into account on a wider programme level rather than examining this on a module-by-module basis. It might be helpful for Guidelines for Examinations Boards to be produced in support of this principle."[15] (USI Statement)

For example, this is how one institution summarised its approach to assessment during the crisis:

"Alternative assessment methods have been developed and adopted across the University's educational programmes taking into account the following principles:

- *Adherence to a Learning Outcomes-based approach, ensuring that all expected learning outcomes are assessed by valid / reliable methods which are appropriate to the module content*
- *Proportionality in according priority to 'Award-stage Assessments' over 'Assessments for In-programme Progression', and either advancing or delaying some components of assessment as appropriate*
- *Ensuring that no student is disadvantaged by the alternative assessment arrangements put in place or by the circumstances prevailing at the time of assessment*
- *Ensuring confidence by appropriate consultation with, and dissemination of information to, all stakeholders (students, staff, external examiners, PRSBs, etc.)*
- *Providing all necessary supports to students undertaking alternative assessments, and to academic and professional support staff involved in their design, delivery and administration*
- *Ensuring the integrity of alternative assessments by ensuring due process for their approval by Academic Council and by [...] Board, by reaffirming the centrality of academic integrity in [...] educational programmes and by implementing all necessary measures to discourage academic misconduct by students"*

Institutions typically rely heavily on invigilated in person written exams for summative assessment. COVID-19 made these impossible. Aside from waiting for the outcome of a deferred assessment, various alternatives were found for assessing learners' achievement of intended learning outcomes (ILOs) including the use of one or more of the following:

- continuous assessment
- non-proctored online[16] examinations with a long time-window
- non-proctored online examinations with a short time-window
- proctored[17] online examinations.

Non-proctored exams were typically 'open-book'[18].

Based on the responses we received from institutions, the following 'gleaned elements' give our *impression* of the kinds of approaches that were used. For reasons of brevity and clarity we have taken licence to interpolate, simplify, generalise or synthesise from similar or related reported approaches. We list these gleaned elements without comment. They are accompanied by a selection of examples.

---

15 https://usi.ie/education/statement-on-student-concerns-regarding-assessment/

16 Here we mean the examination is delivered online and the student submissions are collected online.

17 Invigilated is an alternative term that is widely used in Ireland.

18 Globally, 'open-book' can mean different things. One institution's website states that "An open book exam allows you to use study materials, internet and books while doing your exam." Another states "In an open-book examination (OBE), students are permitted access to their notes and/or other resources."

4.1.1 Policy, principles, and oversight

Gleaned elements include:

- Academic councils oversee the quality assurance of the modifications to arrangements for assessment.
- Build and implement procedures for the approval of assessment modifications upon established quantity assurance and management infrastructures suitably adapted.
- Maximise the opportunities for learners to accumulate credit during Semester 2 (Q1-Q2 2020). Replace onsite examinations with alternatives for summer 2020 and the autumn repeats.
- Avoid modified assessment arrangements "disadvantaging" students.
- Make use of *QQI Principles for Alternative Assessments*. Update policies and procedures as necessary.
- Take a subsidiarity-based approach to devolving authority for approval of change to distribute the work and avoid saturating the capacity of more central committees such as academic councils.
- Establish a framework for developing, quality assuring and approving alternative assessments.
- Provide principles and guidelines for modifying assessment including practical assessment, assessment of research students, and repeat assessments.
- Use programme/stage/module learning outcome-based approaches to consider the best alternative assessment strategy and assessments to validly and reliably assess those outcomes having regard to what can already be inferred from any already completed assessments.
- Aim to be as faithful as possible to the validated programme assessment strategy.
- Guide so the expected learner effort for the alternative assessment will be comparable to normal assessment effort.
- Alert external examiners to the approach.
- Alert professional recognition bodies to the approach and secure their assent where necessary.
- Establish alternatives for assessment for all years.
- Different arrangements may be appropriate for assessment for internal progression and award eligibility.
- Prioritise assessment for eligibility for award.
- Allow early stage students to progress based on continuous assessment (CA) alone.
- Pass/fail grading may be appropriate but consider the future implications e.g. on GPA.
- Take the diversity of students into account when modifying arrangements. For example, avoid creating new barriers for students with disabilities. For example, consider how robust alternative arrangements are against limitations on access to broadband or suitable devices.
- Make provisions for accommodating exchange students and international students affected by the crisis.
- Recognise the technical difficulties for students that real time online examinations may cause.
- Try to ensure alternative assessment arrangements are robust against cheating.
- Use online proctoring if practicable and where appropriate—but in the current situation its implementation may be prohibitive[19].
- Use plagiarism prevention and detection measures and make students are aware of these.
- Require students to read, understand and sign an honour declaration before undertaking an assessment.
- Provide for any student to undergo a viva voce to help protect academic standards and integrity.
- Defer assessments where no appropriate reliable, valid alternative can be implemented.

---

19 Owing to the lack of resources to implement it. Video conferencing software could be used to invigilate small groups—but this is resource intensive.

- Allow[20] students to defer but encourage them not to (e.g. by providing safety nets to increase their confidence such as allowing them to repeat to improve without penalty or to defer during the examination).
- Allow students to defer after they have begun an examination.
- Allow students to repeat to improve by undergoing repeat assessment.
- Allow viva voce examinations in an online meeting environment (e.g. MS Teams or such like).
- Provide for relaxed progression arrangements.
- Allow for exceptional progression for affected students if they will not become overburdened as a result.
- Provide guidance for the conduct of examinations.
- Provide guidance for the operation of online examination boards and review the arrangements for the online provision of materials to external examiners.
- Adapt the frameworks, guidelines and principles based on feedback requested from staff and students during implementation.

For example, here is how one institution developed its response to the 'no detriment' campaign:

"The national No-Detriment Campaign supported by Students' Unions in different higher education institutions was an issue that [...] moved quickly to resolve in the best interest of students and to provide clarity for faculty. A Working Group was established entitled Working Group on Supporting Students in Assessment during Covid-19 to consider the emergent issues."

"The Working Group concluded that a universal approach would not work and the focus should be on each [...] student where their needs would be addressed on an individual basis and where the appropriate supports could be offered within existing assessment and grading frameworks. Using this as the starting point, [...] recognised that all students involved in study and assessment [...] had extenuating circumstances that should be taken into account during the grading and grade approval process. A new extenuating circumstances application process was introduced to expedite and deal with applications quickly. The Working Group, in discussion with the Registrar and Deputy President, recommended a number of temporary amendments to [...] Academic Regulations to reflect the Covid-19 context. [...] Academic Council Executive Committee ([...] April 2020) approved a number of Covid-19 temporary amendments to Academic Regulations with reference to [...] grades and opportunities for module remediation." (The same institution)

Another institution reported:

"Policy: It was determined in 2019/2020 that [the Institution's] Assessment and Standards policy (...) was robust enough to deal with issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Institute policy regarding AP (Approved to Progress) and EP (Exceptional Progression) could be interpreted appropriately in line with Assessments and Standards (...) in the context of COVID-19...."

Another institution set out some of its principles for COVID-19 alternative assessments as follows:

"The alternative assessment should not disadvantage students. It is important to consider the implications for honouring learning agreements and for AP students.

It is also important to bear in mind that students may not have reliable access to the internet/ to devices needed to complete assignments/space to study. Some will also have additional caring responsibilities at this time. For these reasons, we recommend that assessments be asynchronous where possible. This means that that window of time given to students to prepare their alternative

---

20 Keep in mind that these are extraordinary measures that apply in a time of emergency.

assessments should be long enough to take account of these issues.

If a student considers that they will be disadvantaged by the alternative assessment they can apply for a deferral on this basis.

The workload/effort for the alternative assessment, and for the Stage as a whole, should be comparable to the original.

Where possible, use a format of alternative assessment that is already familiar to students and keep the process as simple as possible (for students and staff).

Provide clear instructions to students on what is expected of them and how it will be marked."

Other examples:

All students should be given the opportunity to ask questions about the alternative assessment and to identify any potential problems in advance (e.g. internet access)." (Institution response)

"… in line with the remote teaching and learning strategies being adopted at this time, assessments should be conducted remotely, to the maximum extent possible, and as deemed appropriate by the internal examiner, external examiner, and Head of Department and subject to the approval of AC Exec on behalf of … Academic Council." (Institution response)

4.1.2 Communication

Gleaned elements include:

- Communicate regularly with staff and students.
- Be consistent across programmes to avoid confusion.
- Post guidance and FAQs to the institution website and alert students and staff through all the usual channels.
- Use a suitable software system to keep a record of communications between lecturers and students about assessment arrangements for each module.
- Other than to consult them, avoid informing students of proposed modified arrangements until they are approved.
- Publish information about alternative arrangements on the institution website to help promote public confidence in 2020 awards.

An example:

"Communication to students was seen an essential element as the student's anticipation and expectations, particularly around the examinations and assessment processes, had entirely changed. The sit-down, written exam would be gone, and a new alternative assessment conducted online which they had not experienced before, was being presented. This involved an element of anxiety for both Students and Staff, and therefore needed to be managed, through open and clear communication." (Institution response)

4.1.3 Assessment support for students

Gleaned elements include:

- Develop guidelines on alternative assessment approaches including remote assessment for students.
- Provide tips and online resources to help students prepare for assessment.

- Guide students on how to engage with assessment with academic integrity (e.g. honour codes).
- Provide a "live exam support channel"
- Train and instruct students to prepare them for the technicalities of remote assessment.
- Advise students to (and how to) check their technology and systems access privileges in advance and who to contact if they run into difficulties.
- Provide a mock exam to help students prepare.
- Make arrangements for students who run into difficulties on account of special circumstances.
- Adopt a flexible approach.
- Ensure that reasonable accommodations are made as required when implementing alternative assessments.
- Inform students who to contact if they have questions about the assessment.
- Provide contact points to field questions from students.
- Ensure academic staff stay reasonably connected with their students during assessments and are available to field questions.
- Provide helpline numbers for student support.
- Make students aware of the supports that are available.
- Work with the student union to engage with learners who may need support.
- Alert students to essential information such as exam dates and submission deadlines (e.g. by phone text).

Some examples:

"In terms of Student Supports for assessment purposes, a number of Students required scribes for Examinations and/or Assessments. The Institute normally provides this support, but it was not possible under the existing Covid19 conditions. To enable the continuation of this essential support for these Students, the Academic Council Standing Committee at its meeting of April 23rd approved the Scribe or Reader could be a family member of the relevant Student." (Institution response)

"The following sets of resources, communications and guidelines were developed in conjunction with Registry/Assessment and Teaching and Learning. [...]

- *Advice for students on preparing, getting set up and taking online exams*
- *Guidance on timed online exams*
- *Guidance on open-book or take-away exams*
- *Student FAQs for taking a quiz*
- *Students FAQs for assignments on [the VLE]"* (Institution response)

"To support students with new assessment methodologies, information guides were issued in relation to academic integrity in online assessments and an introduction to open book examinations. They also receive details of technical and other supports available to them in relation to online examinations..." (Institution response)

"The Student Experience team were available to all students during the examination periods to help alleviate stress and resolve technical difficulties quickly. Emails with specific exam tips were sent to all students sitting exams to help them achieve success." (Institution response)

"Where problems were identified, lecturers made sure to provide a non-digital alternatives [sic] for project task completion, such as drawing, use of printouts and scanned material, etc. Students were also assured that their project work would be assessed on its merits, irrespective of presentation or analytical format. For other modes of learning; notes were emailed to students along with the extensive use of the VLE. Where there was apparent difficulty or apparent lack of engagement from a

student they were contacted on mobile phone by the year tutor across many programmes and follow up mails were also initiated by Programme Coordinators." (Institution response)

"Student support (both academic and pastoral) continues to be delivered primarily through on-line interactions, in particular support for students experiencing anxiety and/or difficulties in dealing with off-site teaching, learning and assessment. To permit additional time for preparation, the dates of assessments for in-programme progression have been delayed by approximately three weeks across all programmes. In addition to providing the customary supplemental examinations for students who are unsuccessful at first-sitting, provision has been made for holding 'super-supplemental' examinations to facilitate students experiencing significant difficulties." (Institution response)

4.1.4 Assessment support for staff

Gleaned elements include:

- Provide principles and guidelines or training for staff on:
  - » Assessing the achievement of learning outcomes
  - » Criterion based assessment
  - » Rubrics
  - » Implications of 'academic integrity' for assessment design
  - » The technicalities of online assessment from conception, through the examination board stage, to repeats and the conclusion of any appeals process.
  - » How to design the common types of online assessments
  - » Correcting or grading scripts or other submissions whether online or offline.
  - » The marking and secure storage of scripts whether printed or in electronic form.
- Develop and publish FAQs and checklists to help staff prepare their assessments and see them through to implementation and completion.
- Provide individualised advice and support to staff who require it.
- Alert staff to online resources such as those of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning.
- Identify an assessment coordinator in each school for the COVID-19 assessments.

For example:
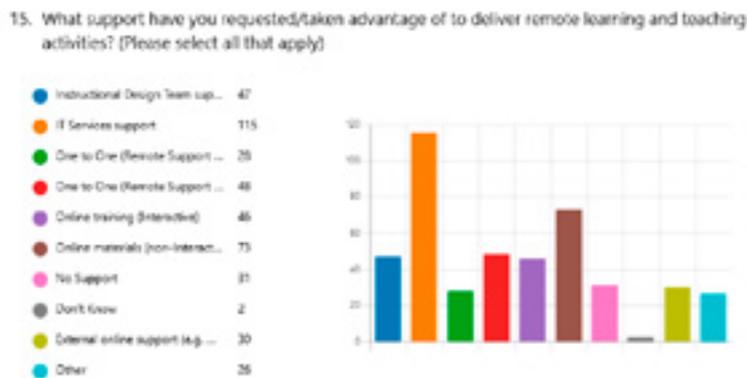
Figure 10 A result from a staff survey in one institution.

Another relevant example:

"Given that it will not be feasible to send all examination papers/coursework briefs to external examiners for review, internal examiners are advised to confer with colleagues in regard to revised assessment plans for modules." (Institution response)

4.1.5 Development of assessment modifications

Gleaned elements include:

- Develop contingency plans and keep them updated as new information is received.
- Where possible, use modes of assessment with which students are already familiar.
- Recognise that an examination that is valid and reliable for assessing against a given standard when taken in person within a controlled invigilated environment may be invalid and unreliable when set as a non-proctored online open-book exam.
- Make use of the institution's TEL support centres.
- Make use of NFETL (and similar) resources as a source of ideas for alternatives.
- Give each programme board the central role in the coordination of alternative arrangements for its programmes.
- Allow a predicted grade for practical elements where appropriate.
- Liaise with PRBs about any programme accreditation or qualifications recognition issues arising from modifications to assessment.
- Inform external examiners of alternative assessment strategies.
- Consult with external examiners on modifications to assessments.
- Maintain records for each programme and module detailing learning outcomes assessed, alternative assessments used, the schedule of assessments for each module.
- Design coursework-based replacements for repeat examinations where possible and appropriate otherwise use open book examinations.
- Allow extra time for time-bound examinations to allow for technical problems and to provide some flexibility (e.g. one institution scheduled slots no less than 4 hours long).
- Consider variability in students' health, welfare and individual circumstances when designing online assessments and when timetabling and coordinating assessments across programme stages.

- Consider demands on students' time when setting deadlines.
- Consider asynchronous assessments to minimise problems for students with connectivity or caring responsibilities.
- Design failsafe measures to deal with technical problems that may arise in online assessment or during the submission of assessment assignments.
- Consider that some students may not have the tools and facilities required to engage in remote assessment.
- Coordinate assessment at each programme stage.
- Ensure that modified assessments avoid making disproportionate demands on students' time.

For example:

"The critical thing, of course, is to ensure that the amended exam modality is both fair to students and also academically credible." (Institution response)

For example, to give a sense for the kinds of changes that were made, one institution that asked staff if they had to change their "module assessment approach due to remote teaching" found that 68% (98) did and 32% (46) did not. They also asked staff how they assessed their module and the response was: 53% (75) continuous assessment (CA) only, 44% (62) CA and final exam, and 3.5[21]% (5) exam only.

The following example, gives an impression of the level of use of proctored online exams:

"Schools were asked to advise on their plans for assessing modules by [...] April 2020 noting that all Schools had done so. He reported that only 69 modules, representing 9% of overall modules, require real-time online invigilated exams." (Institution response)

Here is an example of the distribution of types of alternative assessments used in one institution according to a staff survey:
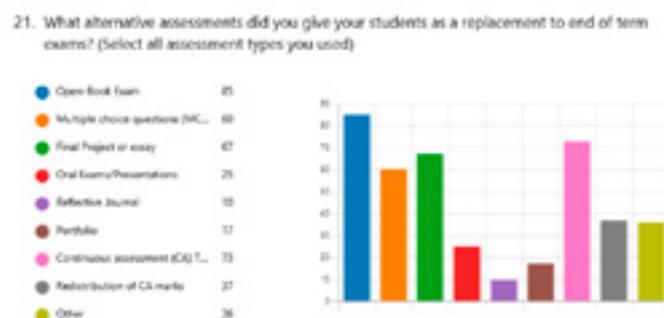
Figure 11 A result from a staff survey in one institution.

---

21 Too small to round as the others were.

Here is another example:
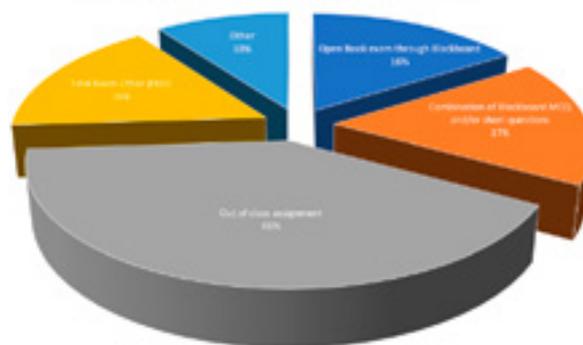
Figure 12 A result from a staff survey in one institution.

For a more specialised example:

"Despite the current limitations, some clinical skills assessments are feasible through remote-working; for example, OSCEs focusing on consultation skills (history-taking) were delivered successfully for students in the MSc [...] programme. In contrast, for more senior students in Pharmacy, the workplace-based assessment of clinicals [sic] skills continues as usual through continuous evaluation by the preceptors in the community pharmacies where they are based." (Institution response)

4.1.6 Implementation of modified assessment

Gleaned elements include:

- Be flexible, recognising that COVID-19 affects everybody and that alternative arrangements may affect some disproportionately and in unanticipated ways.
- Act with 'integrity and sensitivity' when grading.
- Allow examination boards 'greater latitude than normal' so that affected students are not disadvantaged.
- Ensure examiners are reasonably available to field clarifying questions during the examination.
- It is essential for any live assessments (e.g. viva voce) to use reliable technology.
- Be equitable and be consistent.
- Keep to the usual assessment submission procedures as much as possible, while transferring to an online system.
- Allow online submission of assignments via email or through other tools (e.g. Blackboard/ Turnitin).
- Provide clear instructions and timely information.
- Ensure students know what is expected of them.
- Record on the transcript that results were obtained during the COVID-19 crisis.
- Make every effort to support learners including those with special needs such as learning difficulties, disabilities of any kind, and difficult personal circumstances.
- Allow controlled access to campus computing facilities for students with connectivity problems

subject to government guidelines.
- Ensure the security of any assessment related material or data stored at or communicated from remote locations (note the GDPR implications.)
- Monitor assessment results against expectations based on previous years' results.
- Regard COVID-19 as an exceptional circumstance for the purposes of examination board decisions and appeals.
- Mitigate against student disadvantage because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Gather feedback from staff and students for adaptation and future evaluation of the processes.

Some relevant examples:

"Using GURU as a 'repository' for the alternative assessments worked well as it was a place where lecturers could upload pdf's that the external examiner could view. It was the main quality control as the external examiner could see it. Without this method, third party QA would be difficult. To be able to validate to students that there is an independent external examining process is recognised as very important." (Institution response)

"At programme board level, all alternative assessments are considered in relation to achieving the expected module and programme learning outcomes. Once approved these are then considered by the Programme [...] Committee [...] of Academic Council where again discussion on the achievement of the expected learning outcomes and the appropriate structure surrounding the delivery of the alternative assessment takes place. Once approved by [...], the alternative assessments are taken to Academic Council for approval. It is only following debate, discussion and approval at all these stages is an assessment considered to be an appropriate alternative assessment." (Institution response)

"The school has considered this as opportune to further road-test an artificial intelligence-based remote proctoring technology (Mettl Online Proctoring Software). If successful, it is envisaged that the outcomes of this testing could determine the potential for broader consideration of such an alternative, and potentially widening the range current assessment practices in respect of invigilated examinations." (Institution response)

4.1.7 A little more on academic integrity

With many institutions replacing invigilated unseen in-person written examinations with online exams that were frequently non-proctored there were greater opportunities for cheating in the second semester of the 2019/2020 academic year than normal.

While the opportunities for cheating may have increased, all institutions have experience in preventing, deterring and detecting breaches of academic integrity especially plagiarism. Institutions have regulations on academic integrity and established procedures for dealing with suspected cases of academic misconduct.

There has been an increased focus nationally on academic integrity during the past year or so with legislation[22] in 2019 that creates new offences and the launch of the QQI-sponsored and HE provider-led *National Academic Integrity Network*. There has also been a special emphasis on combatting contract cheating (e.g. buying or selling an essay or dissertation online).

During the 2020 summer examinations season some institutions took the opportunity to ensure that students understood that the principal responsibility for ensuring academic integrity lay with the student.

---

22 Section 15 of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019 makes it an offence to provide or advertise cheating services.

Some institutions required students to sign an honour declaration to eschew academic malpractice and comply with institutional regulations.

Some institutions made provisions for a confirmatory *viva voce*.

Much of the assessment in Semester 2 was non-proctored. There is some indication of an increase in suspected plagiarism cases, but we do not yet have hard data.

The level of detail that the responses used in this report provided on approaches to combat cheating varied. The following example is from the robust end of the spectrum.

"The principle of Academic Integrity is emphasized in the University's policy documents concerning professionalism, student conduct and examinations. Due consideration has been given to the prevention and detection of academic misconduct in the design of alternative assessments. For example, on-line MCQ examinations are delivered on the ExamSoft and Speedwell web platforms with provision for randomization of question presentation between candidates and for on-line proctoring of all high-stakes degree-contributing assessments. In all assessments, students sign a revised Academic Integrity statement at the start of the examination, reminding them of the Code of Conduct commitment that they sign at the start of each academic year, and of the recently enacted Irish legislation in relation to examination fraud. The University continues to use Turnitin as its primary similarity-detection tool in those programmes (mostly taught postgraduate programmes) where submitted assignments make up part of the portfolio of assessments. These alternative examination arrangements are enabling Final Year graduations in Summer 2020 as intended, [....]" (Institution response)

The following further exemplifies the range of measures taken:

"To maintain quality, procedures are put in place such as a declaration by the learner that the work submitted is their own work which demonstrates their ability. All work will be checked via online tools such as Turnitin to ensure that the work is correctly cited. Our policies and procedures already include the ability to schedule oral examinations in addition to the submitted work. This can be all learners, randomly selected learners selected for quality assurance verification purposes or selected learners where a violation of academic integrity is suspected. Incidences of suspected academic integrity violation will be reported to the Vice President for Academic Affairs where appropriate action will follow. The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019 has put in place and stiff penalties for the provision of cheating services and [...] will be working closely with QQI in relation to any suspected incidences." (Institution response)

"All [...] students undertaking assessment in this semester are required to complete the ... Declaration of Integrity. The declaration has been integrated into [the VLE] and to date almost 14,000 students have completed it in [the VLE]. In addition to the Declaration, Schools are employing other strategies to ensure the integrity of the assessments, including:

Use of plagiarism detection software (e.g. [...])

Through assessment design:
- *Requiring personal reflection;*
- *Random question order;*
- *Random answer choice on MCQs;*
- *Individualised questions."* (Institution response)

"[...] piloted the use of online proctoring during the 2019/2020 academic year. This proved fortuitous as we had some experience in its use in advance of the Covid 19 emergency." (Institution response)

Examples of indications of possible misconduct:

"Some students also indicated that they had concerns that their peers may be collaborating." (Institution response)

"One school noted that plagiarism is a major concern and while real time online exams worked well, it is important to rethink invigilation and take measures to prevent plagiarism and academic misconduct." (Institution response)

4.1.8 A little more on external examining and examination boards

The practice of using external examiners[23] for the quality assurance of summative assessment in higher education is another mainstay. At award stage the external examiner reviews the examinations and contributes to the approval of results. In normal times, some may briefly meet final-year students during the year.

Examination boards are meetings of academic staff involved in assessment along with others such as academic managers and coordinators, and external examiners. These boards are responsible for the approval of results.

"The operation of Examination Boards including provision of assessment of materials to external examiners was reviewed to take account of COVID-19 circumstances. Assessment materials were made available to external examiners by remote means (through the Moodle VLE and also Microsoft Teams)." (Institution response)

"The Vice President for Academic Affairs and Registrar wrote to all External Examiners to inform them that alternative TLA arrangements were being put in place and that these would be communicated to External Examiners by the academic Schools. External Examiners were very supportive in facilitating the modified TLA arrangements." (Institution response)

"The Registrar and Deputy President wrote to all Subject Externs on […] March 2020 outlining the decisions taken by […] relating to teaching and assessment and setting out the expectations and considerations that directly impacted on their role. Additional procedures and processes were put in place to facilitate subject external examiners to fulfil their role remotely and securely by providing direct access to student material and systems where it was considered appropriate. … […] provided external examiners with limited and secure access to view information directly in […] systems. This included access to School summary grading data and, where agreed with each School, included access to relevant module information in our virtual learning environment, […]. Guidance information was provided to each external examiner with reference to setting up an account, the types of systems and levels of access, confidentiality requirements and contacts for queries. […] Assessment also provided a dedicated webpage with further information that was updated regularly. External examiners were made aware that access to materials from the last trimester was not available to most staff due to Covid-19 restrictions." (Institution response)

"For AY 2019/20 the examination Statistics Report was modified to present data for the last five years. This allowed for comparison of the current examination session's performance in the module with that over the previous four years. Where the current year's Institute module average differed from the average of the previous four years by more than 30% that was highlighted for consideration. In reviewing the statistics, there was no significant variation noted. This provided comfort to all of

---

23 The term 'external examiner' applies to two distinct roles in higher education. The role considered here has to do with the providing external advice to an institution on the arrangements for taught programme examinations. The other involves the assessment of a candidate for a research degree and their research thesis.

the quality assurance and integrity of the modified teaching, learning and assessment strategies." (Institution response)

Earlier, we provided an example of how one institution developed its response to the 'no detriment' campaign. Here is a little more detail on the practical implementation of its response:

"A suite of new reports was developed by [...] Assessment which underpinned student support in the Covid-19 context. This enhanced reporting and significantly improved the ways in which grading data was managed, thereby supporting Module Coordinators, Schools and Programme Examination Boards in the review, analysis, verification and approval of grades and GPAs." (Institution response)

"A new feature 'Module/Subject/School/Programme Observations' was introduced to ensure comments or observations on the grading of modules could be recorded directly within the grading reports" (From the same institution)

Finally, a reaction from an external examiner:

"Just finished two days of final Visual Communications Design 4th year assessments. Super enjoyable discussion/debate with staff and some very inspiring projects. Look out world next gen of crazy talented designers are landing."

4.1.9 Assessment of candidates for research degrees

Research degrees at doctoral level involve the examination of the thesis which is read by an internal and external examiner and a *viva voce* examination of the candidate based on the thesis. In the current circumstances, the *viva* can be arranged by mutual agreement of all involved using software like Zoom or MS Teams.

For example:

"Our graduate research students were provided with a range of supports to facilitate the progression of their studies through FAQs and webinars. Students who were due to have their Viva Voce examinations were able to do so online and the University worked closely with the external examiners to ensure that this was a smooth process for each of our students." (Institution response)

"Application for approval for conducting a virtual viva voce examination is made through the Chair of the Research and Development Committee of Academic Council." (Institution response)

4.2 Outcomes

We do not yet have sufficient information on outcomes (e.g. results) to analyse or draw conclusions.

During the quality dialogue meetings, the institutions indicated that an initial analysis of the assessment results and overall grades yielded no remarkable findings in comparison with previous years.

4.3 Challenges

The value in identifying challenges is that they can lead to the identification of development opportunities.

Many of the challenges overlap with those arising in the adaptation of teaching and learning (e.g. access

to broadband and devices, the dearth of time available to adapt). We shall not repeat these.

The timescale for the completion of examinations was broadly similar to normal. This led to a substantial increase in the workload of all staff involved in making alternative arrangements.

Assessment of physical skills was complicated particularly if it required specialist facilities or equipment. For example:

"In the case of the creative arts, presentation of work in progress posed a number of challenges – works of scale and varying formats and materials could not be fully realised due to restrictions on technical tools and facilities. Students and staff responded by exploring various modes of submission that fully documented and demonstrated the critical and creative strengths of the works. While these changes enable students to meet the learning outcomes it limited the scope and ambition many that many of our creative arts students would have for their work. Regretfully, we also had to cancel our end of year graduate exhibition but have supported the students with an online showcase and exhibition of their work." (Institution response)

Non-proctored open-book examinations were more susceptible to cheating than the proctored unseen written examinations that they sometimes replaced. Contract cheating can be difficult to detect. This situation provided an opportunity for institutions to place an increased emphasis on advising students to be aware of approaches from essay mills and of the risks for anybody who engages with them. The assessment of coursework is also susceptible to cheating, but this is not new.

Here is an example from a staff survey in one institution:

"Staff were asked whether they had any concerns for academic integrity by moving to alternate assessments. Some staff indicated that they had no more concerns than prior to the impact of COVID-19 and had designed their assessment to minimise plagiarism or cheating. Other staff indicated concern over the potential for unauthorised student collaboration on assignments and projects. Some students also indicated that they had concerns that their peers may be collaborating. In preparing for the next academic year, staff indicated their preference for a return for timebound examinations while others indicated that, with more time to prepare, they would create assessments that would minimise opportunity for unauthorised collaboration." (Institution response)

Designing open book examinations to replace invigilated unseen written examinations is challenging for the academic developing the test especially if they are new to this type of examination. Similarly, it can be more challenging for students to sit an examination with an unfamiliar format.

"Often students consider the idea of open-book assessments as easy, mistakenly thinking that they can just find 'the answer' in their textbook or notes. In addition, they can be challenging for an assessor to design in that they need to think more about the application of knowledge and concepts rather than the memorisation of knowledge and facts. Open-book assessments generally don't ask for definitions, they check for understanding through application and analysis." (Institution response)

Examinations are stressful for students at the best of times. Changing the approach with only weeks to prepare and in the context of all the distractions generated by the COVID-19 pandemic can only have added to the stress.

One institution's student survey report noted the following challenges relating to managing changes to assessment (see also the following figure):

- *"Doing the exams in a home environment*
- *Group projects were a total nightmare*

- *Final year exams were online and were completely different in layout and content to previous exams.*
- *Assignments all due within a week of each other- overwhelming"*

One large institution that reported on a comprehensive student survey (greater than 5000 respondents) of found that:

- *"Many students were unclear about what their exams would involve and found instructions difficult to follow: Certain lecturers were slow in clarifying what exams would look like and when they did the instructions were often unclear.*
- *In April 2020 Student Advisers recorded 1,904 interactions with students (1,788 in April 2019). Similarly, in May 2020 numbers were up slightly on the previous year (1,604 compared with 1,339 in 2019). Throughout the period the issues that students raised remained fairly consistent; administrative queries and assessment issues being the primary concern, followed closely by issues in relation to stress, coping and anxiety."*
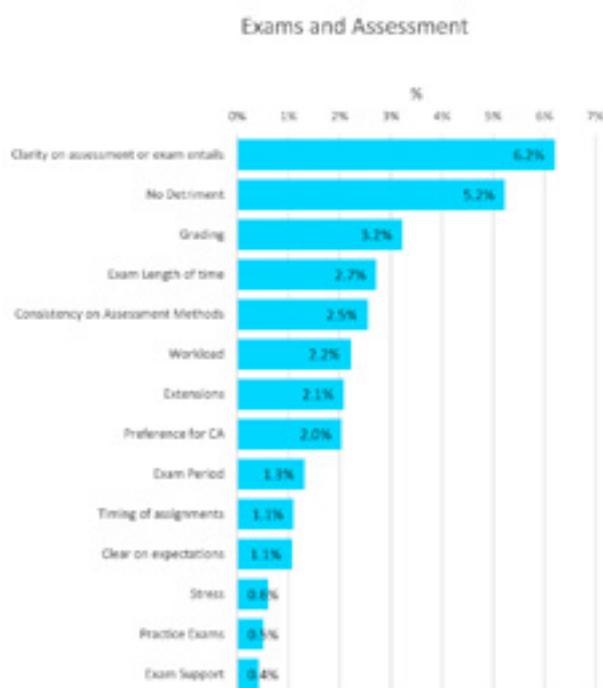
Figure 13 Issues related to examinations and assessment. A result from a student survey in one institution.

Other examples of issues follow:

"Satisfaction with Communication from ... was very high (78.9 %...). However, communication re Tests/Exams received a 19% Dissatisfaction rating. This also correlates with it being seen as a theme in open text responses ...." (Institution response)

"They could have set up online exams different as they were much more complicated then written exams and much harder to get done within time frame due to scanning of documents and personal bad internet connection at home. I believe exams should be given more time to complete due to fact not all students have good internet." (Institution response—student survey)

"I feel that online assessments with longer time periods allocated would have been more favourable." (Institution response—student survey)

"58% of students agreed that deadlines for alternative assessments were manageable. Issues relating to deadlines on assessments are mentioned frequently in relation to challenges students faced during the stay-at-home period." (Institution response)

"The top rated stressor for students in the past two months was exams and assignments, followed by studies in general. The next highly rated relate to managing daily life – employment, relationships, living situation, and finances." (Institution response)

"Students did, however, indicate that their workload increased considerably and found that the effort required to complete all of their assignments was substantially more than sitting the traditional examinations." (Institution response)

Online assessment involved more work for some staff (and sometimes other kinds of problems), for example:

"Other common experiences related to the amount of time it took to do ordinary tasks: real-time exam invigilation was very onerous on staff; building online assessment was time consuming because it was necessary to retain similarity to preceding assessment methods to provide familiarity for students; it wasn't feasible in [the VLE] "to screen quickly answers into groups of excellent, good, ok, poor and then grade"; it is more time consuming to mark exam scripts or essays on [the VLE] and anonymity is not possible. …" (Institution response)

Examples of other staff concerns follow:

"Allowing 48 hours for completion of exams was felt by one school to greatly restrict the type of assessments that could be used while retaining discriminatory marking." (Institution response)

"One school expressed concern about high class average (10-20%) for some modules, and another expressed concern about the overall inflation in grades across all modules and, with few exceptions, across the four years as a result of the move to online assessment. Another school felt that the exam answers did not show any serious engagement with material delivered/discussed online." (Institution response)

4.4 What worked well

Broadly the move to online assessment worked well considering the circumstances. For example:

"Respondents reported that overall the transition to online and take-home assessment modalities went relatively smoothly. Take-home examinations and open-book examinations worked well, and some felt that these types of assessment were a better gauge of students' learning than the traditional formats and were more beneficial for students. Some felt that take-home examinations might be something to retain if things return to 'normal'." (Staff view) (Institution response)

"Those who administered online assessments reported that they were relatively straightforward, however, extracting relevant material (submissions, grades, feedback) from [the student information system] for external examiners was time consuming. Providing a detailed breakdown of how marks could be assigned for written assignments was helpful for students and staff, and typed assessments, instead of handwritten scripts, were very helpful and saved some examiners a lot of time. … Real time, online exams through Blackboard were administered in a limited number of cases and respondents reported that this process worked well especially for some groups. Case based questions requiring application of knowledge were effective assessment tools." (Institution response)

"[...]Teaching and Research 'Show and Tell' 2020 which took place on Tuesday 16th of June 2020. This was an unprecedented end of year as our whole operation had to adapt at short notice to remote working and assessment. The focus of this year's event was designed to reflect this experience and to find a way to share in a collegiate manner the experiences and ingenuity of staff across the Institute (academic, student support, library, student services etc.) as they rose to the challenges inherent in this change.

The Show and Tell offered an opportunity for staff to present and share the approaches they developed in response to remote teaching, learning and assessment." (Institution response)

Some examples of things going well for students were:

"Overall incredible response by the [...] team. As I mentioned above, I was skeptical at first at the dramatic response and even went as far to think everyone was "over-reacting". Within a week it was obvious that [...] had made the correct and responsible decision, and seeing the comparatively delayed global response a few weeks after our long cases were finished further solidified to me [...] was correct. I am still so impressed by the planning and foresight of [...] to predict how the situation would escalate from only 1 case in late February. I am constantly reminded that when we were informed our long cases were being moved up, Ireland only had 2 confirmed cases (March 2nd) and to see how much the situation has escalated (not only in Dublin, but globally), I cannot imagine having just finished our long cases this week. Again, I have always looked forward to becoming an [...] alumni, but even more proud now given how well the [...] team navigated this situation." (Institution response—student feedback)

"No one could have planned for all of the different circumstances and events that would happen from March onwards. Every student's life was changed in some shape or form. At ..., the psychology team did everything to make sure we could finish the year out, at the very least. Our feedback was taken on board for alternative assessments that would suit both the students' and staff's needs. And if it didn't work for everyone, it could be tailored and managed. The priority was always on the wellbeing of the students and staff. This is something I never considered when deciding what degree I wanted to do, and yet became one of the best and most important things about my experience at .... BSc(Hons) Applied Psychology" (Institution response student feedback)

"A majority of students who required additional assistance were of the view that where relevant their reasonable accommodation was recognised in their online examinations (68.8%, n=172, Total N=250)" (Institution response)

The crisis stimulated assessment innovation. Some assessors "observed instances of deeper learning from their students". For example:

"... One positive outcome of the current crisis for [...] is that novel and creative forms of assessment are becoming more common throughout the university. Our traditional focus on terminal, formal, written examinations is perforce being re-examined. Additionally, the Assessment Strategy's call for exploration of on-line and PC-based forms of assessment is now well advanced." (Institution response)

"It has become clear that there is more than one way to assess a module, and that reliance on terminal exams is not always the best way. Initial indications are that while there was some increase in the number of deferrals, students performed equally well, if not better, with modified assessments." (Institution response)

"In response to covid-19 restrictions a number of activities related to teaching, learning and assessment were moved to online. A number of these modifications have been considered as so positive that the Institute may consider continuing them going forward eg. Student Special Circumstances and Appeals processes completed through online." (Institution response)

External examining worked well online, for example:

"Although External Examiners were not in a position to visit […], the External Examining process continued. Programme leaders and Heads of Department were in communication with the External examiners from the outset. External examiners were notified of the opportunity and means to review assessment material. While there was administrative complexity, the External Examining process worked well. It was a replication of process that the external examiner would do ordinarily if on site at […]. In fact, it was noted that more external examiners were present at Examination Boards for the Summer Session this year when compared to previous years, due to ease of attending virtually." *(Institution response)*

The learning outcomes approach helped, for example:

"The impact of the alternative assessments on the quality of the programme and the graduates was the main concern of academics. All staff reviewed the alternative assessment requirements to ensure the learning outcomes were being assessed. The learning outcomes were the constant and everything was directed and guided by these. The QQI Guiding Principles was an effective guide that needed to be taken into consideration to ensure academic integrity." (Institution response)

"A great deal of thought went into designing projects, deliverable online which were equally challenging and rewarding as the group work which would have been carried out in the class. Thinking through equivalences helped with this process. This will have to be carefully planned in the case of an autumn submission as an equivalent effort on the part of the student will be required." (Institution response)

4.5 Conclusions

The early indications are that things went reasonably well considering the circumstances.

The assumed heightened risk to academic integrity due to the replacement of invigilated in person examinations with non-proctored online examinations or increased continuous assessment will require continued vigilance in 20/21 and some more robust ways of remotely assessing but we cannot yet quantify the change in risk. We have described the strategies that institutions have used to draw students' attention to the expectations regarding academic integrity. In their communications to students, institutions draw students' attention to codes of academic conduct (e.g. honour codes) and they require students to sign integrity declarations when taking non-proctored examinations.

While many students were satisfied or at least neutral there were some that were dissatisfied with various aspects of how things were handled. Some of this is inevitable e.g. dissatisfaction about the loss of things precluded by the COVID-19 realities, but not all of it is like that and we need to understand what can be done to enhance the response for 20/21.

Further studies will clearly be required to understand the full implications of COVID-19 in 2020 and the consequences for students, staff, programmes, professions and institutions.

5. Starting 20/21

Social distancing will continue to constrain higher education teaching, learning and assessment modalities in 20/21. People are learning to adapt to COVID-19, but it is highly contagious, and its exponential growth potential is ruthless. The risk of reescalation of social distancing restrictions remains. On-campus capacity will be reduced while COVID-19 remains a threat.

An evolving range of additional resources have been published to help institutions plan for the 20/21 academic year.

1.   Return to Work Safely Protocol (Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation)
2.   Principles and Guidelines for the delivery of Higher Education Programmes in the 2020/21 Academic Year in the context of the COVID-19 Pandemic (THEA)
3.   Guidance for Further and Higher Education for returning to on-site activity in 2020: Roadmap and COVID-19 Adaptation Framework (Department of Education and Skills)
4.   Practical Guidance for Further and Higher Education for Returning to On-site Activity in 2020 (Department of Education and Skills)
5.   Implementation Guidelines[24] for Public Health Measures in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

Contingency planning for the 20/21 academic year was well underway by May 2020. Institutions must make hard choices when balancing in person and remote activities for 20/21.

5.1 Quality assurance

Quality assurance will continue to be central in maintaining continuity of learning in 20/21.

5.2 Supporting new students

20/21 will provide some new challenges in addition to those already encountered not least the induction of beginning students in the context of a COVID-19 reduction in on-site capacity. Some examples illustrate:

"Speaking to concerns for the 2020/21 academic year, the following were conveyed. Students, undergraduate and postgraduate, entering College for the first time in 2020 will not have had an opportunity to bond and may find the online experience particularly challenging and alienating. This is also daunting for many staff and will generate additional problems in relation to group work. Weaker students seem to be particularly disadvantaged in an online environment and this needs careful attention." (Institution response)

"…Supporting Student Engagement in general in the context of remote delivery. Evidence has shown that the weaker/vulnerable Students required further supports and tended to trail off without their normal structured environment to promote their engagement. This will also be a particular challenge for 1st Year Students beginning their higher education experience. …" (Institution response)

"We will be welcoming first year students with a specially prepared blended induction programme, building on our successful 'First Five Weeks' programme. This year, as part of the Government's Return to Work Protocol, all continuing students will also be required to engage in an induction programme." (Institution response)

---

24 These were published on 5 August. They were developed by HEIs and are being promoted, for example, by THEA, IUA.

Academic Practice is leading the development of a 'Learning to Learn Online in [...]' module, targeting all students entering [...] in 2020/21. The objectives are to develop a pedagogically led module to support students manage their learning and assessment in an online environment, and to identify and develop scaffolding strategies to support and engage students in a remote learning context. The project involves input from Student Learning Development, Disability Service, the Transition Officer, the IUA Enhancing Digital Capacity Project, and student representatives." (Institution response)

"To support the transition of students into third level, a tutoring scheme is proposed for all first-year students. Currently around a third of first-year students report having an academic mentor. In addition, there are a number of academic tutors in the Skills Centre who provide academic writing development, academic skills, research resources and specific academic assignments resources to all students. All first year students are assigned a peer support leader from a matching programme. Peer support provides practical, emotional and social support to students as they adjust to life in [...]." (Institution response)

"For the first time ever, as a result of public health physical distancing guidance and the resultant need for some elements of online teaching and remote access to resources, all new and returning students must have a device and connectivity to participate in their education for 2020/2021. We are working with the appropriate bodies to seek additional national support for those students that would otherwise be disadvantaged in this model while also committed to increasing the accessibility for all our Online teaching resources through enhanced use of lecturing captioning." (Institution response)

5.3 Improving online teaching, learning and assessment

Academic staff development needs to enhance expertise in online teaching and learning include:

- situation-specific (discipline, subject, academic level, level, class size, level of student engagement, and so on) evidence-based guidance on pedagogical approaches to moving teaching and learning online and their implementation
- situation-specific evidence-based guidance on the valid and reliable (this includes robustness against cheating) assessment of learning and learners against standards based on statements of knowledge, skill and competence including grading of achievement
- training in the use of technology for online teaching, learning and assessment
- guidance on dealing with academic misconduct by students in the online context
- access to specialist technological and pedagogical support for moving online.

Maintaining academic integrity in the context of increased use of online assessment alternatives will require continued emphasis. For example

"Quality and Qualifications Ireland produced Guiding Principles for Alternative Assessment in response to the Covid-19 crisis for all providers of education at the end of March 2020. Decisions made at [...] through the Academic Leadership Forum meet the principles expressed in the Guidelines. These guidelines will continue to be relevant for adaptation to assessment arrangements as a result of the pandemic during the next Academic Year. Plagiarism is an area of particular emphasis as a result of the rapid move to digitally mediated assessments and as a result of the amendment in 2019 to the Qualifications & Quality Assurance (Education & Training) Act which empowers QQI to prosecute those who facilitate cheating (p4). The need for evaluation of the success of the alternative assessment arrangements is emphasised also". (Institution response)

Institutions that surveyed their students and staff have a good basis for enhancing the approaches they developed during the spring/ summer campus closure. For example:

"The experience and knowledge acquired since the closure of our Institutions has greatly informed the plans and decisions we have made for next year."

"While respondents highlighted concerns, they also highlighted areas that needed to be addressed for 2020/21 remote online delivery of teaching and learning. Specifically, the provision of more interactive software other than Panopto, Zoom or [the VLE] so as to better engage students; more adaptation of [the VLE] to help address class cohorts in information and onboarding sessions online; more break-out features and active speaker switching and built- in usable whiteboard functionality; ability to stream live lectures from theatres with the capacity to record and make these available online; availability of student software licenses, student access to the software in terms of downloading and installing the software and student access to appropriate PC devices to install and run the software; a general overview of online learning and specific webinars on potential approaches and topics that staff could try; support provided for students who can't afford broadband, computers etc. It should be pointed out that there was limited familiarity with product specific functionalities at the time of the survey, and IT Services and Academic Practice continue to provide training, professional development workshops and supports in the areas identified." (Institution response)

"The survey responses showed the need for a focus on training teaching assistants and demonstrators to support the delivery of the curriculum online, including working with small groups, tutorials, and facilitating discussions in a remote learning environment. There was a concern that PhD students may be reluctant to take up demonstrating duties, which would seriously curtail such activities. A need to hire teaching fellows to support the delivery of additional small group tutorials was expressed. The training needs of casual staff was also highlighted as many of these staff may not have the digital competency needed for online delivery, and further it was suggested that schools will have to have protocols in place to support adjuncts and casual staff in the remote learning environment." (Institution response)

"It was felt that revised guidelines on how to deal with plagiarism online as well as real time live invigilation to reduce plagiarism would help. The need to be able to proctor and invigilate online exams and such functions as the ability to freeze a student's desktop for the duration of an online exam were deemed necessary. Other concerns related to providing clear guidelines to students on the nature of assessment; and the need to train students on how to take exams on [the VLE] and staff in the use of [the VLE] for freeform examination responses." (Institution response)

"Professional development requirements included: how to design and administer online assessments; course assessment question design that stretch students; designing open book assessments in mathematical, problem solving oriented subjects; guidance around assessments, i.e., around scripts with high Turnitin similarity scores, and guidance on plagiarism in the online context; advice on how to set an essay question that will avoid students dropping out of lectures to just focus on writing their essay; access to some examples of assessments that worked well; use of additional features for anonymous grading and multi-part answers in Turnitin for end of semester online exams; quizzes in realtime; more interactive elements in assessments." (Institution response)

"IT Services have additionally developed a programme of supports, the 'Master' programme, that has been informed by:

- *the experiences of the College Community to the rapid pivot to Emergency remote online delivery of teaching, learning and online assessments,*

- *the responses to this qualitative survey; to the Irish National Digital eXperience survey and the USI National Report on Students and COVID-19;*
- *and requirements emerging from University's Pedagogy and Resumption of Teaching working groups.*

The programme is focused on offering a bridge between the Pedagogy group's modules that support academic staff as they adapt their teaching practice for use in an online/ hybrid learning environment and the identified modes of delivery for online module components in Semester 1 2020/2021. It includes:

- *Mode-appropriate sessions, set-ups and supports that offer*
- *Application knowledge for the supported University technology-enhanced learning systems*
- *Skills in the techniques for enhanced quality audio and visual preparation and delivery*
- *Technologies to support online and hybrid preparations and delivery.*

Webinars on the technology-enhanced learning applications began in July 2020 and will run continuously well into the first semester of 2020/2021. These sessions are designed to complement the 'Adapting our Teaching for Learning Online' module described in Section 7.1 of this document. These online sessions are recorded and are supported by a range of self-paced resources. Guidance on affordable products for self-preparation is being developed and a pop-up clinic for audio-visual skills development, practice and development of materials is being assembled." (Institution response)

"If we must again assess students on-line for autumn and Christmas 2020, we will learn from our recent experiences and put in place plans for on-line assessment that mirror those done with considerable success for the summer examinations. In particular:

- *The views of staff on the effectiveness of on-line assessment will be surveyed in June/July.*
- *Further guidance will be given to academic staff on how to phrase questions for time-limited open-book examinations and on the judicious use of Canvas Quizzes.*
- *The possibility of a piloting remote proctoring will be investigated.*
- *The effect (if any) of on-line assessment on average grades in the recent summer examinations will be investigated.*
- *The draft recommendation in the Assessment Strategy of general continuous assessment in Semester 1 of first year will be reconsidered.*
- *The possibility of providing venues on campus will be investigated to accommodate students with poor Wi-Fi connectivity."* (Institution response)

5.4 Supporting students while remote

Here is an example of a measure being planned for 20/21 to support students and help build online communities in the context of a remote higher education experience:

"The Keep Well Website was the result of a collaboration between Sport and Physical Activity, Student Health and Wellbeing, Media and Communications, LifeMatters, SafeMed, NSRF, DSS, Peer Support, Academics, SU, Student Counselling & Development, IT, Everyday Matters and Skills Centre. It offers a one stop shop for information on how to support one's physical and mental health and wellbeing, and how to recognise symptoms of mental distress that require help, and where to look for that help needed.

Currently an online moderated forum to help students 'connect' with each other and their university is under development. This is a collaboration between SU, Societies, Clubs, Peer Support, Admissions,

and Applied Psychology and aims to help students to connect with other students and to foster a sense of belonging in a remote university experience. ....” (Institution response)

“Continue to develop an effective strategy to communicate the availability of Student Supports Services and how they can be accessed remotely. In light of survey, ensure adequate mental health supports are available.” (Institution response—response from student survey)

“As for a student with disability, the transcripts of all lectures by my Note Taker was essential to me and will be in the next academic year as well. Thus, it would save much of my time forwarding recorded lectures, if the direct access to Loop would be provided for my Note Taker herself.” (Institution response—response from student survey)

One institution reporting on its student survey observed:

The most frequently cited improvement relating to the provision of clear information from the University during the crisis. Over 300 respondents made suggestions relating to clarity of information in responding to this question. Examples of feedback included,

- *“Having clear guidelines for completing weekly tasks”*
- *“Providing information on exams/assessments for 4th years sooner to allow students to plan earlier”*
- *“More information provided in a timely manner regarding the course work and placement”*
- *“Condense important information into one email rather than sending a number of emails with the necessary information”* (Institution response—response from student survey)

5.5 International and exchange students

Some described changes to admissions criteria for prospective international students whose normal examinations had been disrupted by COVID-19. For example, specific temporary changes to how applicants could demonstrate their English language proficiency or other entry requirements for 20/21.

One response noted changes in policy on international exchanges for 20/21—they would be available but not compulsory in the first semester, another foresaw 'study abroad' being paused in all but exceptional cases.

5.6 Communications

Institutions recognise the importance of communications to prepare people for 20/21. For example:

“A careful and staged communication strategy will be developed during the summer to provide the necessary reassurances for both staff and students regarding the planned approaches and to give time to adapt their teaching and assessment methods and to prepare for an unfamiliar approach to learning.” (Institution response)

5.7 Conclusion

On the basis of the responses we have received, and our knowledge of the higher education sector, we are confident that higher education institutions will continue to respond to the many challenges and to adapt their practices reflectively to provide high quality programmes and credible academic qualifications during the COVID-19 crisis.

CHAPTER 6: NATIONAL SURVEYS OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

Contents

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an intensive debate in Ireland, as elsewhere, on the effectiveness of remote (e.g. online) teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) and the preparedness of higher education institutions (HEIs) to successfully provide remote higher education and training.

This chapter is based on the secondary analysis of large-scale surveys capturing experiences of students in third-level education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

USI shared with QQI anonymised survey responses (n=835)[1] pertaining to TLA during COVID-19. Most students (89.2%) replying to the survey attended either an institute of technology or a university. Only 11% of those replying attended other types of institutions (see Table 1 below).

Table 1 – USI data – breakdown of survey responses by sector

Type of institution	Number of students	% of Total
Institute of Technology	384	46.0%
University	361	43.2%
Technological University	63	7.5%
Teaching College	14	1.7%
FE/FET College	6	0.7%
No response	7	0.8%
TOTAL	835	100.0%

AHEAD furnished QQI with an initial analysis of data (based on 631 responses) from the AHEAD COVID-19 survey of Irish FET and HE students with disabilities. A snapshot is presented in section 2.4 of the main obstacles faced by students with disabilities based on the AHEAD data. Links to USI and AHEAD reports are available in the footnotes[2]. We have also received detailed reports from higher education institutions that describe the results of extensive surveys of their respective students. The findings presented in in this chapter are broadly consistent with all these reports and complement their findings.

Students' narratives from the higher education sector indicate that students were faced with a plethora of common challenges during the COVID-19 outbreak. Sections 2 and 3 illuminate a synthesis of the obstacles, barriers, and challenges that students faced, highlighting the impact of the recent pandemic on them and on Irish HEIs. A summary of key findings on main concerns, overarching needs, ideas, and suggested improvements is also provided.

Both sections 2 and 3 are based on quantitative and qualitative secondary analysis. While the quantitative strand provides the overall picture, the qualitative strand captures the depth of the responses by giving voice to concerns and challenges encountered by only some of the students[3], therefore one must be careful in generalising from the quotations, but it is important for those voices to be heard in order to enhance the overall student online 'college experience' in future.

---

1 89% (n=743) of the students who completed the USI COVID-19 survey were undergraduate degree students.

2 USI. 2020. National Report on students and COVID-19
https://usi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/COVID_RESEARCH_FINAL.pdf
AHEAD. 2020. Learning from Home During COVID-19 – A Survey of Irish FET and HE Students with Disabilities
https://ahead.ie/Covid-19-student-report

3 Please note that quotations presented in section 6.2 and 4 include minority views or single views.

Section 2 presents some specific findings. It centres on students' perspective on the effectiveness of communications and online TLA. Furthermore, it explores the impact of COVID-19 on the learner experience of students with disabilities and international students. It also outlines some ideas and suggestions for the next academic year.

Section 3 outlines general findings and focusses on: what was lost with the changes, what worked well and what has potential to work well if improved. It also provides brief information on the situation of students enrolled on professionally accredited programmes. Finally, it outlines some of the main technological obstacles faced by students and gives insights into the most common challenges faced by students in terms of their personal circumstances.

Direct students' quotations are presented in tables. Synopse of overall challenges, and further needs and ideas from qualitative analysis based on paraphrased students' narratives, are presented in bullet points in italic.

2 Specific Findings

2.1 Communications

The analysis of students' responses to the USI survey seems to indicate that across all HEIs, more than half of all students agreed/strongly agreed that their HEI provided them with timely and effective communication about the move to online teaching (see Figure 1).
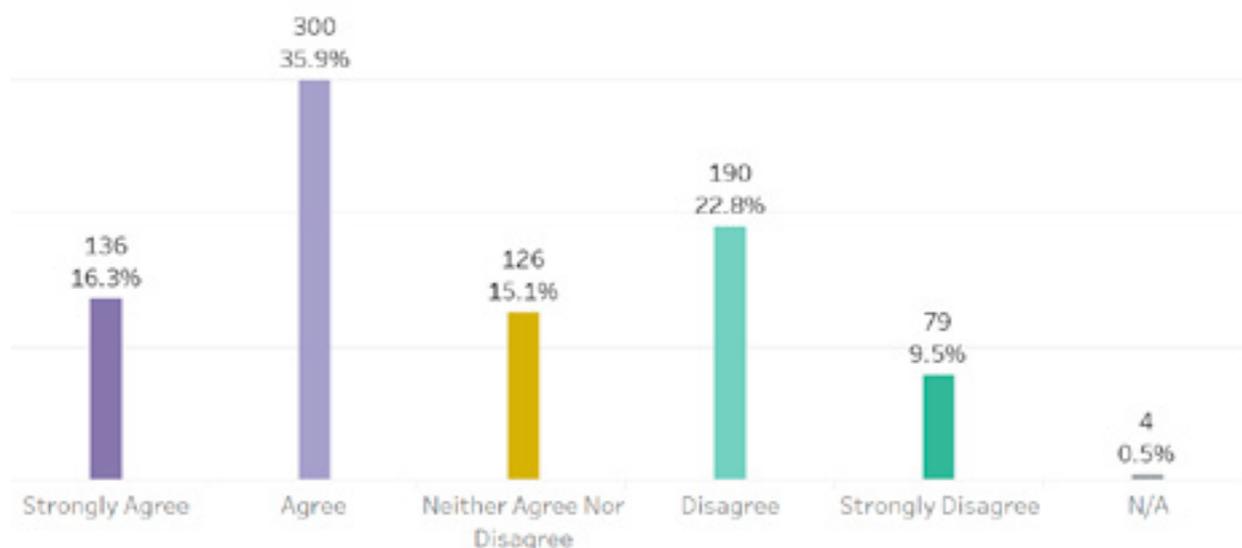
Figure 1 My college provided me with timely and effective communication about the move to online teaching.
Source: Anonymised data from the USI COVID-19 survey.

Information was generally communicated directly by teaching staff and/or institution website and email.

The communication between students and their tutors seems to have been adequate, and most students (60.2%) agreed that they had opportunities to engage with their tutors during the COVID-19 crisis (See Figure 2 below).
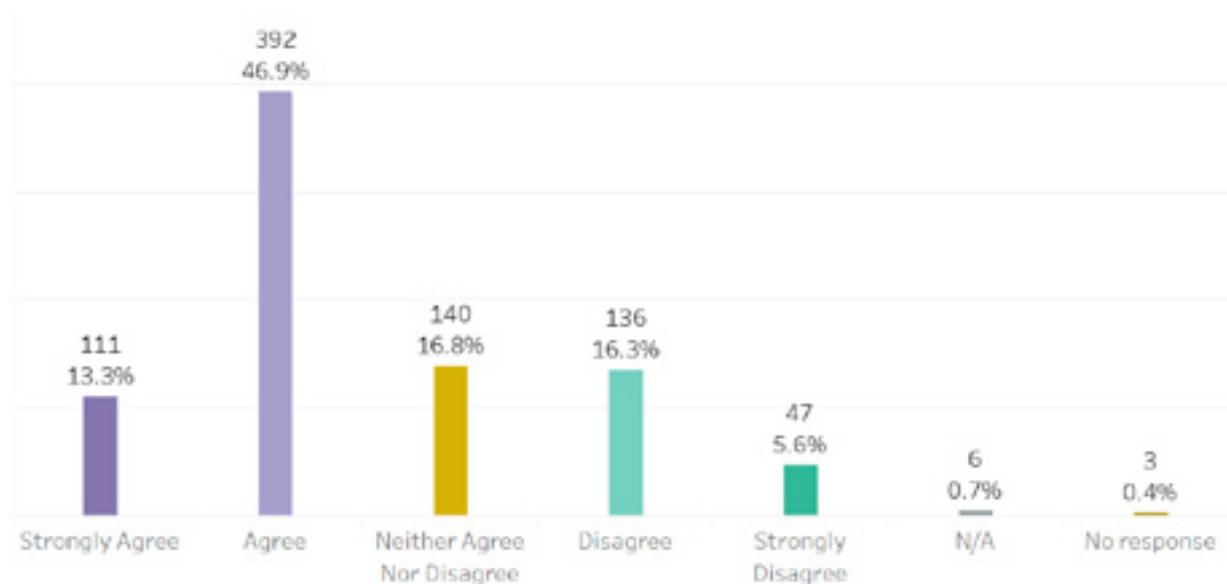
Figure 2 I had opportunities to engage with my tutor/s. Source: Anonymised data from the USI COVID-19 survey.

Analysis of the qualitative data shows that there were many examples of good practice, where students were informed about any forthcoming changes in an efficient manner.

"We were communicated with in a very efficient manner. Even before the decision to close universities was made out lecturers and tutors were open with us about the possibility of moving to online teaching and how that may work."
"We knew almost immediately about our alternative forms of assessment and had been advised on how to prepare efficiently."
"We get emails regularly from the college which keeps us updated, we are quite lucky as I know some of my friends in other educational institutions have not had this support and communication from their colleges…"

In some instances, students reported feeling confused and/or inadequately informed.

"For the first couple of weeks, no-one knew what was happening; no-one knew when we had to go online."
"Personally, I feel more communication in letting students know there was work being done in the early stages of the pandemic could have been greater. In saying that, most lecturers, out [sic] head of department and college management were good at keeping us up to date at least once a week."
"The communication from the university was poor. We were emailed often, but the content of those emails was always something to the effect of 'we're doing our best', with no real information on timelines."

2.1.1 Key needs and ideas (HE students' perspectives):

- Improve communication with students (clear, honest, and regular)
- Introduce online office hours
- Facilitate ways of collaboration and communication between students in the class
- Display empathy and support towards students in difficult situations
- Request disability officer(s) to contact and support students with disabilities

2.2 Teaching and learning

The analysis of the learning environment from students' perspective indicates that over 77% of students agreed/strongly agreed that their HEI provided the online learning opportunities required during the pandemic (See Figure 3).
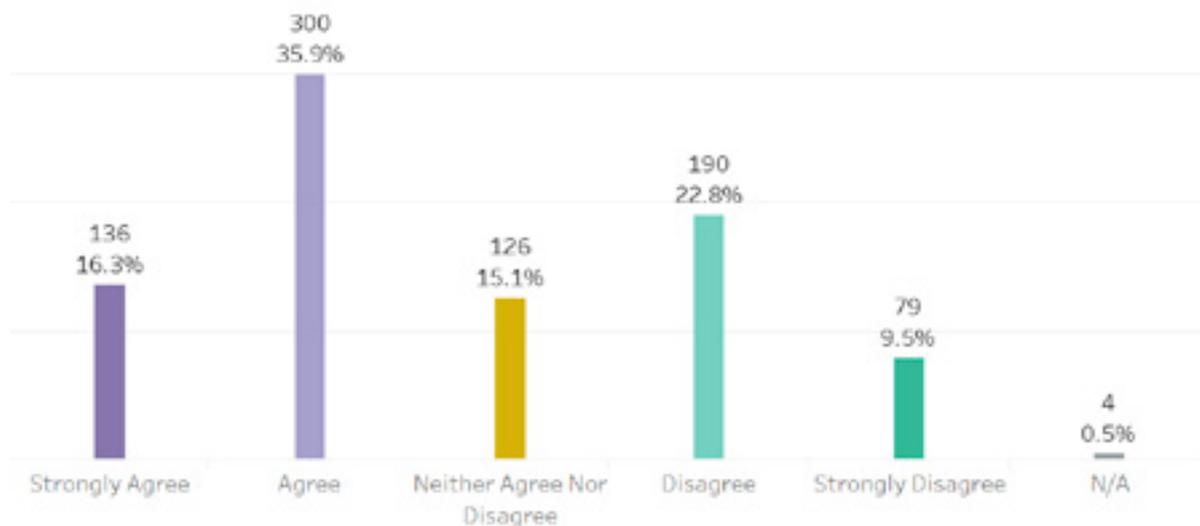
Figure 3 My college has provided online learning opportunities required as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.
Source: Anonymised data from the USI COVID-19 survey.

Despite the positive opinion of such a large majority of students about the online learning opportunities, the analysis of students' narratives suggests that not every member of teaching staff had adequate experience in delivering online teaching including supporting remote student learning. The sudden and unexpected shift from classroom learning to remote (online) learning against the backdrop of widespread anxiety and disruption caused by the pandemic placed HEIs, teaching staff and the students under considerable strain. While today's students by and large are more tech-savvy than previous generations, the recent pandemic has shown that online education is highly dependent on good internet connectivity, access to devices and effective online teaching.

2.2.1 Key concerns and challenges (HE students' perspectives)

- Lack of access to devices and reliability of the internet connection
- Lack of online learning content
- Poor/unengaging learning content
- Not enough resources available online including often limited off-campus access or no access to library

- Difficulties in using online tools
- Difficulties in engaging with class/tutors/lecturers
- Difficulties in contacting lecturing staff
- Students with disabilities additionally challenged

2.2.2 Further needs and ideas

"Require lecturers to have a Padlet so that they aren't inundated with queries and students get answers quicker + if their question has been answered already on Padlet the lecturer won't have to answer the same question multiple times."
"Better use of online services (Moodle) as the information and content provided was not clearly laid out (assignments and weekly lectures in incorrect folders etc)."
"Ensure all lecturers understand how to upload and work with Moodle and if online classes are necessary, that the lecturers organise and stick to a plan when classes are going to happen."
"Make mandatory for all lecturers to log required hours of lecturers per week. Some lecturers held no classes and left 5-minute WhatsApp voice notes instead."
"More engagement (Only 50% of my lecturers even bothered to teach online, the other 50% simply stopped teaching during COVID-19)."
"Providing a wider set of resources from which the students would be able to learn, being clear about how the teaching methods will be delivered and what the assessment will look like..."
"Consider [...] students when preparing any form of material, especially assessment and online classes."
"I think every effort should be made to facilitate online classes via Zoom etc. I think these online conferences should mimic the normal college day – they should be held as they would normally be scheduled in the week. I would prefer online classes rather than lecturers posting PowerPoint slides for us to go through ourselves, I learn best when taught from another person and think that it is important that we are still taught by our lecturers going forward, rather than having to go through the slides ourselves. I think this type of class will allow for interaction, discussion and questions, as well as provide a sense of normality."

Overall, most students responding to the USI survey found the online content delivered by HEIs during the COVID-19 crisis to be of good quality (only about 28% of students responding to the USI survey disagreed).
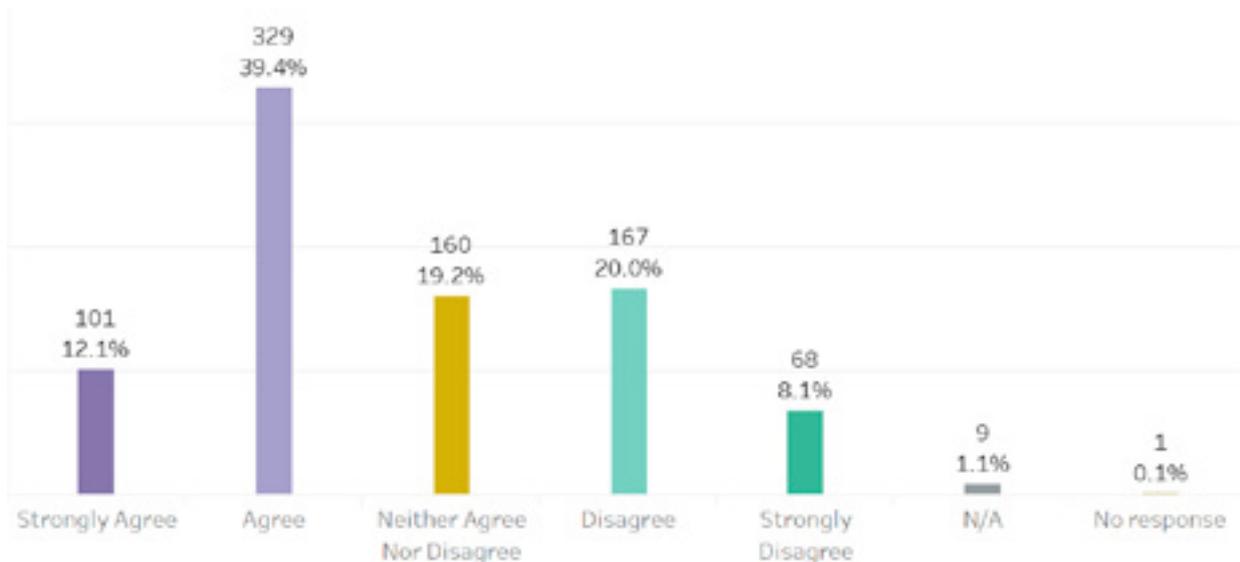
Figure 4 Overall, the online content offered to me was of good quality. Source: Anonymised data from the USI COVID-19 survey.

The agreement response is higher among 'First Year Continuing' students than among 'Non-First Year Continuing' students and 'Non-First Year Graduating' students. Only one in five 'First Year Continuing' students disagreed with the online content offered by HEIs.

2.3 Assessment

Analysis of available data shows that approaches to alternative assessments varied across HEIs – from final assessment to continuous assessment, from open-book assessment to closed-book assessment. Exams were often replaced with essays, quizzes, and projects. Practical exams were cancelled and replaced with online assessments or deferred while projects or vivas with tutor(s) replaced work placements (in some cases placements were put on hold). Some assessments were carried out much earlier than planned, in a new format often unfamiliar to students; some HEIs offered mock exams to prepare students for altered assessment and measures were taken to ensure that students had support during assessment in case of poor Internet connection and technical issues.

Data from the USI survey shows that these alternative approaches to assessment were adequate as almost 60% of all students replying did not feel worse off as a result of the alternative measures put in place by HEIs (See Figure 5 below).
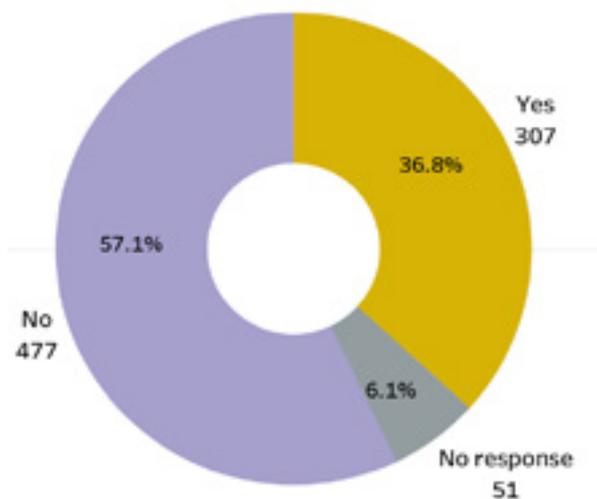
Figure 5 Did you feel particularly disadvantaged by the alternative assessments?
Source: Anonymised data from the USI COVID-19 survey.

Further analysis of responses to the USI survey indicates that the opinion of students about the alternative assessments appears to depend on their stage of study. Also, some HEIs seem to have been better equipped to meet students' needs as shown below by Figure 6.
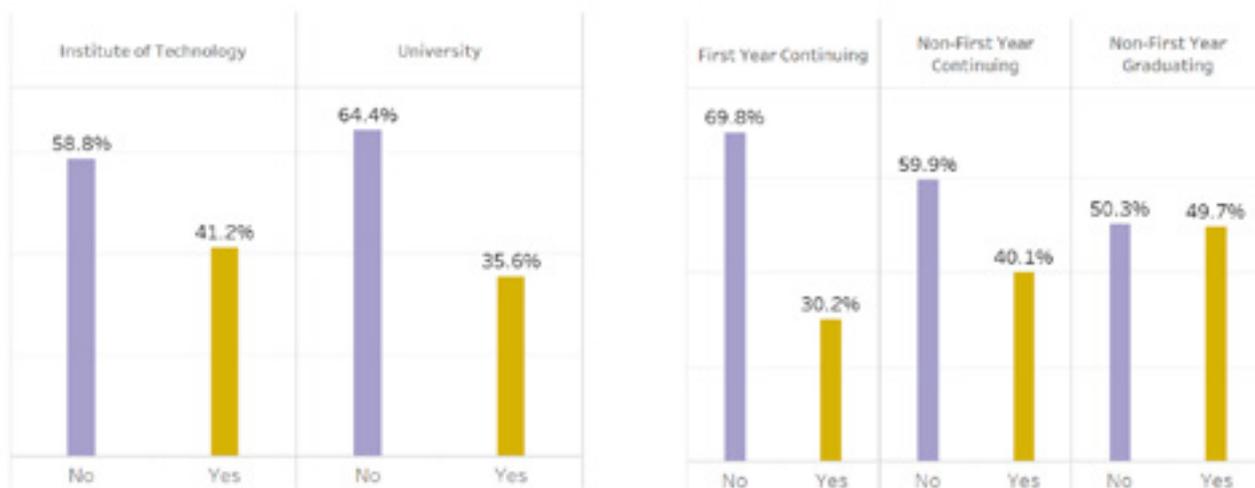
Figure 6 Did you feel particularly disadvantaged by the alternative assessments? By type of HEI and stage

Despite HEIs efforts to address student's needs, almost 2 in 5 students replying to the USI survey felt that their performance was negatively affected by the alternative assessments.
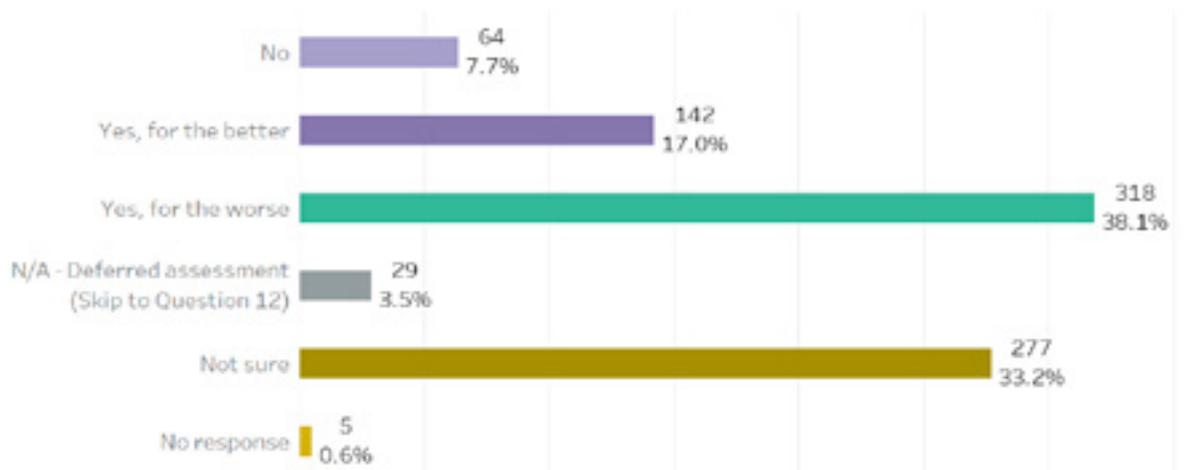
Figure 7 Overall, do you think your performance in assessment differed significantly as a result of alternative assessment?

As before, the opinion of students appears to have been influenced by the stage of the programme and type of institution they attended. Figure 8[4] below shows that 'Non-First Year Graduating' students felt their performance was worse in the alternative assessment when compared to those students continuing their studies. On the other hand, almost 20% of undergraduate degree students from universities felt that their performance improved as a result of the alternative assessment put in place. The 'Not sure' option represents on average almost 40% of all options selected by undergraduate degree students who completed the survey.
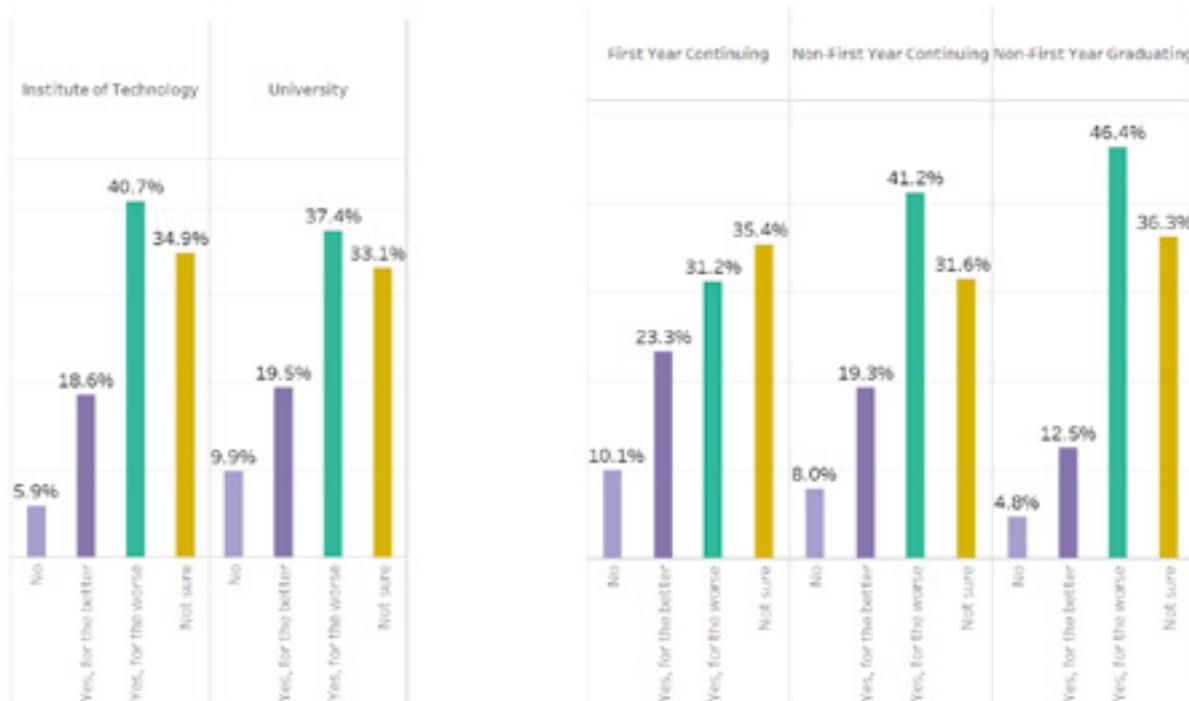
Figure 8 Overall, do you think your performance in assessment differed significantly
as a result of alternative assessment? By type of HEI and stage

4 Based on students' responses from IoTs and universities only.

Key challenges outlined by some students

"…not all lectures take into account that laptops can be slow and not perform to standard compared to the computers in laboratories, and regardless of any unforeseen circumstances, all assessments had to be completed under a given timeframe."
"Several exams gave randomly generated questions – some people therefore may have got repeated questions or easier questions which was not fair as the exams should have been standardised […] We had a lab assessment based on labs we didn't even do…"
"With assessments that require case studies in a given timeframe, there must be additional time given for reading and understanding the case study. This was not the case with the alternative assessments, and in some instances we had two hours to read 5 questions (two of which were 1-2pg case studies), figure out which we could answer best, and then write 3 essays. Had there been an additional 15 mins for question reading I believe this issue would have been fixed."
"We were given extra workloads and told our work would be marked harder […] No extra time allowance would be given to any students in these circumstances."
"Some lecturers changed their minds about assessments online and exams, along with deadlines, a couple of times before settling on the way forward."
"In terms of exams, most modules gave us the originally written exam that was meant to be closed book but told us it was open book now. This did make the exams much easier. Modules that included things like labs, any labs we had not completed were just dropped and the assessment for them radically changed from interviews to a scan of our manual."
"MCQ format[5] exams are entirely unsuitable for STEM exams. Attempt marks cannot be given on an MCQ, which is often the bulk of the marks for a particular question."
"Exam formats were the same, but I had 48 hours for each of 3 exams (far too long) and then only 1 hour to complete a chemistry exam?? It didn't make sense and lab work was very difficult to execute for final assessments."
"We were overloaded with assignments within such a small space of time. We were not able to complete assignments to our standard because we had to finish assignments on the due dates."
"Somewhat, assessments replaced exams, and while they were similar to other assignments, they covered material we had never covered in class, whereas an exam could only assess stuff you've covered."

Furthermore, students mentioned that they were additionally stressed by unreliable internet connections and performance of their computer/laptop that could prevent them from completing and/or uploading their assessments in time.

---

5 Multiple Choice Questions

2.3.1 Summary of main challenges (some HE students' perspectives)

- No clarity on the assessment format, rules and marking
- Bunching of assessments deadlines
- No mock exams
- No possibility to go back on questions (backtracking)
- Miscalculated allotted examination time
- Content of the exam often not aligned with the taught material/modules
- Technical difficulties (formatting, editing, and uploading issues)
- Personal circumstances
- Students with disabilities additionally challenged

Students' narratives show that in many cases the altered assessment with its new layout, extra time, and with support from the HEIs, became a very positive experience.

"Open-book exams allowed for more practical application of knowledge instead of memorising."
"I had more freedom to use my own notes and sources to use in the assessments, rather than learning off large amounts of information to regurgitate into an exam."
"I found this method of assessment much less stressful than traditional exams. I much preferred it. It made my college experience significantly better."
"We had the option of applying for laptops to be sent out to you and all my assessments were adjusted to suit the situation."
"My assessments were on different days which helped me a lot as a family member was using the same laptop for work."
"We were given extensions for assignments and our dissertation, and our supervisors were available by email for any concerns we had. I can't commend them enough for the support they gave us in final year."
"The timing and layout, it took into careful consideration students' needs and the mitigation surrounding the circumstances in which we were carrying out exams was clearly identified."
"Exam were completed while being able to look at course material that was not previously studied which helped complete the exam."
"We were given mock exams which were a great help."
"Ability to do them in your own home and didn't have the pressure of an exam hall."
"It was same as essay and you could research and have books near you."
"Instead of examinations over a 3-hour period, instead we were given 3 weeks to complete a topical essay. This allowed for much more attention to detail and more confidence in the final product"
"There was a COVID-specific grade for students to complete an assessment at a later date if they needed to."
"If a mark hasn't been deemed satisfactory to achieve a passing grade even after careful consideration, repeat exams will be free as a result of the pandemic."

"Change in format of exam paper meant different preparation/study techniques required. I feel the staff did the best they could given the short timeframe allowed to design online format for exams, they informed us of new layout, listened to student feedback on new layout and made appropriate changes based on this feedback."
"The time and open-book assessments!! Brilliant!!"
"I don't think I could improve them any more than they were. The assessments were explained in depth and we were given plenty of time to complete."
"...I found open-book exams to be better overall as I felt as if I was actually putting my knowledge to use and learning it better."
"Less stressful, more time to do them I felt I learned more about the module by doing case studies and having to research information myself instead of learning material off by heart for an exam."
"Less pressure."
"The MCQs worked well for some modules."
"I had mainly online quizzes and assignments so they both worked well for me. we could use books and other resources so I felt less stressed than I would normally."
"Allowed me to understand the relevance of my modules to real life situations because of the assignments replacing exams."
"Moving from 100% exam to 100% essay-based work suited my style of learning."
"More continuous assessment is easier for a lot of people."
"We had access to the answers so of course most students will perform better."
"I think having an open-book exam obviously made things easier, however I do think it will make next year a lot more challenging."

2.3.2 Assessment – QA and integrity – HE students' concerns

"Exams weren't standardised..."
"Results were randomly given out, no official date has been set for results, repeats etc."
"Clearly some people would have cheated, and others wouldn't [...] A security setting should have been set up in some way."
"I think open-book format exams would have been a fairer option as there was no real way to monitor for cheating/using notes during the exam time itself. We had closed-book exams with a Turnitin plagiarism check to deter cheating which I don't think went far enough. Making the exam open book for all would have been the fairest option in my opinion."
"Our exams were a closed-book format however this could not be monitored during exam time. It would be possible for students to look up notes and use these during exam time. A plagiarism check via Turnitin was used to deter this, however I don't think this was sufficient to ensure fairness for all students..."

> *"We had no previous papers to look back on and no guidance on the new assessment. Lectures changing their mind halfway through cause [sic] the external examiner didn't approve."*

2.3.3 Key needs and ideas (HE students' perspectives):

Analysis of students' perspective regarding further needs and ideas in the context of assessment shows the need for:

- More information on the format and execution of the assessments
- Checklists for students and lecturers on assignment due dates to avoid bunching
- Revisions/mock exams or exam tutorials
- Transparency about the marking method
- Provision for technical issues and more time to upload and download scripts
- More freedom of word count within reason and more questions options
- More possibility to go back on questions (backtracking)
- More time to read case study questions
- More time to complete assessment(s) and better guidance
- More project-based assessments and more relevant to the course
- Diversification of the form of assessments (e.g., essays, MCQs, CA, oral interviews, live presentations, theory-based module assignments etc.)

Other notable comments from students regarding enhancement of the online learning experience included suggestions to address issues related to assessment faced by students during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> *"Give extra time. Some people in different courses had 3 hours/24 hours to do their exams. In my course we had 1.5 hours plus 20 minutes to save and upload. It wasn't enough time."*

> *"A more cohesive and consistent method for uploading assessments, as there was a reasonable amount of variation in submission types, which lead to difficulty in submitting assignments and confusion among the class."*

> *"Think more critically about how students will be assessed, and leave the university as qualified professionals, not just passed [sic] an easy exam."*

> *"…Longer times to upload assignments. Ability to email lecturers, exam booklet in case of difficulty uploading to canvas. Longer exam times in general to allow for dodgy internet or laptop issues."*

> *"A standardisation of assessments e.g. a standard amount of time for uploading, standard front page, etc."*

> *"Provide clear guidance on expectations before assignments are set, not during the time given for completion."*

> *"No referencing or the like, takes far too much time!! Maybe use in test references and cite the author and year but no reference list!!!"*

> *"Ensure content of exam relevant to content of teaching module"*

> *"Upload the exam script for students to download 15 minutes or so before the exam time begins and have them complete it by either handwriting or scanning the document to upload it. Or by typing on a word document and uploading it from there. Also allowing sufficient time for people to upload after the exam."*

"More options, we were only given 2 essay questions to choose from but with exams there is usually 6."
"Oral interviews rather than online exams as it is too easy for students to cheat that way. Have the submission of assessments across the exam period and not all in before the exam period begins."
"Give students the option whether to undergo the new case study format or sit an online exam within the same time constraint meaning cheating is unlikely due to not having enough time to create an answer and cheat. There should've been a uniform decision across all universities as some students simply had to write a reflection of their time in class in place of their exam, while others were actually being examined on content which is unfair."
"Methods of examining mathematics could be improved. Providing a Moodle quiz was insufficient."
"Not to require upload of images in pdf as it causes issues for upload. Only use MS Word or similar."
"Make it a file that you download to your computer to complete and then send back with a timeframe for completing and sending back so you aren't relying on having good Wi-Fi for the whole exam, only for uploading it back up."
"The exam paper format and the answer sheet format not being able to use Excel and having to copy Excel onto Word just wasted time limited its use and function."
"I feel that predicted grades should be used as this would be a fair assessment for all."
"No deferring of practical exams."

2.4 Students with disabilities

The findings presented in this section are based on the secondary analysis of the AHEAD findings to the survey responses of students with disabilities across Ireland. Students from all categories of disability were represented in the responses with the highest numbers of students in the specific learning difficulty (34%) and mental health condition (22%) categories. 66% of respondents were enrolled in a higher education programme, while 34% were in a FET/Other programme[6].

It is of note that students with disabilities in undergraduate programmes and in postgraduate programmes, in particular, were significantly more likely to disagree or strongly disagree that they were coping well with learning from home and that adequate support measures were in place for them, than students in FET programmes.[7] (See Figure 9 and Figure 10 below).

---

6 AHEAD. 2020. *Learning from Home During COVID-19 – A Survey of Irish FET and HE Students with Disabilities*
   https://ahead.ie/Covid-19-student-report
7 *Ibid*.
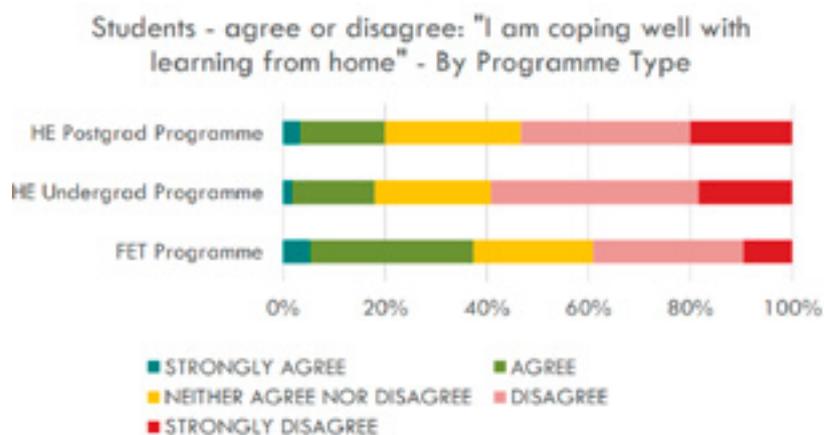
Figure 9 How students feel they are coping - breakdown by programme type. Source: AHEAD. 2020. Learning from Home During COVID-19 - A Survey of Irish FET and HE Students with Disabilities
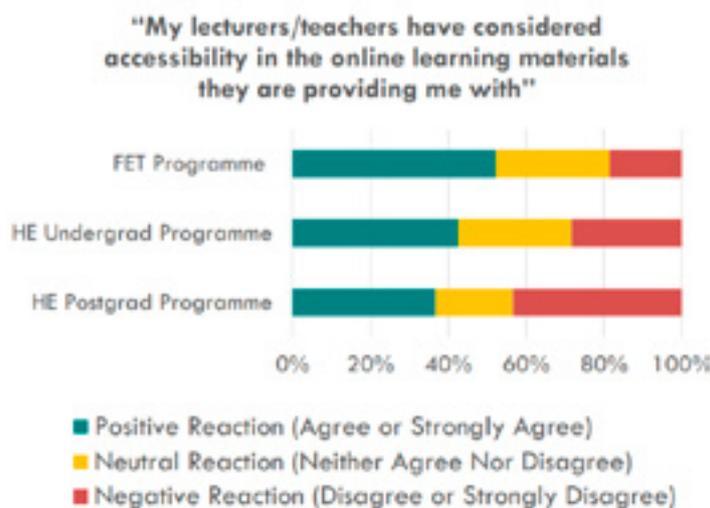

Figure 10 Reaction to accessibility and learning from home – breakdown by programme type.
Source: AHEAD. 2020. Learning from Home During COVID-19 – A Survey of Irish FET and HE Students with Disabilities

In terms of obstacles faced, individual students with disabilities[8] mentioned inter alia:

• lack of structure of the day
• lack of motivation to learn
• distractions/other demands at home/personal circumstances
• lack of clear communication from college regarding remote learning
• unreliable internet connection
• disruption to the disability support provided by the college
• accessibility of learning materials
• worries concerning new type of assessment
• lack of clarity around assessment accommodations
• lack of technical skills.

---

8 Based on aggregated 'AHEAD findings' concerning students with disabilities in both FE and HE sectors.

2.5 International students

International students are an important presence within Irish higher education[9]. They constitute a somewhat distinctive case in the analysis as they continue to have a strong residential presence in some Irish higher education institutions. International students globally have faced distinctive challenges from the pandemic[10]. Press reports paint their experiences in Ireland in a comparatively positive light.[11]

International students generally face intercultural adaptation and have to acquire or master a new language, while at the same time they are detached from their homes, their heritage, and kin. All in all, international students generally need additional support (linguistic, academic, pastoral care etc.).

International students' narratives[12] indicate that during the COVID-19 pandemic, international students faced some additional challenges apart from the common challenges posed by the pandemic and already outlined in this report. A number of international students noted difficulty in 'attending' online classes resulting from time-zone differences, and had often no choice but to stay up late at night if they wanted to continue their higher education and training, including assessments. There are also instances of international students who could not return home and felt that they were left to their own devices, notwithstanding personal circumstances, and the psychological impact of COVID-19.

"Really bad Wi-Fi at home has really worried me a lot every time I do an online assessment. As an international student, the time difference meant that I would be often studying late at night."
"… I'm an international student and I couldn't go home and now I have to look for a job just to find a way to live."
"…My university abroad couldn't care less about Erasmus students."
"My access to the library, I am not from Ireland and rent and therefore stuck with my flatmates which makes it hard to study and learn."
"I'm a non-EU student in ROI and I was asked to move out my house more than twice during this pandemic time."
"International student from the US with family in […] one of the COVID-19 hotspots, which has caused a lot of stress. A job offer was rescinded as part of the pandemic and I worry about finding one after the country reopens.

---

9   https://www.internationalstudents.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2018-07/report_internationalisation_of_
    education_2018.pdf

10 https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/2020/06/26/how-will-covid-19-affect-international-academic-mobility/

11 https://thepienews.com/analysis/aiming-for-excellence-in-a-time-of-crisis-for-international-education-ireland/

12 Based on 51 responses (6.1%) from the anonymised data from the USI COVID-19 survey.

Support measures for international students during the COVID-19 outbreak varied according to the HEI.

"I'm an international student from the US. At the start of this pandemic, my course coordinator reached out to me to assure me that if I wanted to return to the US, we would find a way for me to complete my degree from there. And she has been amazing about checking in."
"Some lecturers were more than happy to help in terms of communication and online lectures, a few had no communication at all with the students."
"Some classmates were really great."
"International student needing increased support."

2.6 Next year

Analysis of students' perspective regarding further needs and ideas in the HE sector shows some demand for:

- more structured approach with a set timetable of classes
- consistent use of TLA platforms (e.g. Zoom or MS Teams) with induction training for both learners and lectures/tutors
- improved access to online resources including off-campus access to library and online databases and other online learning material to be included in all recommended reading
- improved communication particularly between the learners and lecturers
- ensuring all lectures are live, but recorded and made available later to all learners
- if Q&A/discussions are not possible during the lecture, facilitate fora for discussion where students can openly discuss the topic and the coursework
- guidelines/IT training for teachers/tutors to support online TLA and improve students' engagement
- bringing "college environment" to virtual/online environment
- more structure and better communication of coursework and deadlines
- ensuring information is received in a timely manner
- more interaction with lecturers, more online tutorials, and Q&A sessions
- more live and interactive classes where students can ask questions
- providing audio alongside lecture material
- facilitating a more interactive online environment to help students stay motivated
- shorter more concise lectures but more frequent with more support on how to sit the exams
- online videos to explain alternative assessments for students with dyslexia, ADHD, ADD
- consistent online tutorials and more constructive feedback
- walkthrough videos for laboratories
- more tutorials with opportunities to ask questions
- coordination between lecturers to avoid bunching
- materials should not be removed from online learning platforms
- more guidance relating to assessments including IT requirements
- more student support (counselling, funding, devices/equipment etc.)
- more opportunities for social interactions .

Other notable suggestions from students regarding improving the off-campus, online learning experience:

> "Should the college continue some courses online for the foreseeable future it is important to do so in an ordered, systematic way wherein there are a number of topics given online per week that the class works through together and there is an expectation set for what should be completed in a given week."

> "A timetable for all online classes. All using the same platform to communicate and better feedback of our work…"

> "Online lectures uploaded that can be viewed whenever suitable for student"

> "Instead of posting things and getting us to teach ourselves actually teach us the content."

> "Move towards the conventional learning experiences in the college. Set up lecture halls to accommodate social distancing. The lecture should be recorded for those at home and may have underlying health conditions who wish to not attend the college."

> "A survey should be given to assess people's availability of equipment/internet so that everything is fair."

> "Having ways for students to socialise (particularly for incoming first years). Virtual office hours. More tutor engagement. Video over live lectures with the assurance we could contact lecturers with any questions."

> "Make the online material more engaging. Have the lecturers be more enthusiastic."

> "Create a directory of online events for easy registration and scheduling. More regular online meetings with peers and course coordinators. More accessible learning formats – videos are great, but need to be downloadable for those with poor internet and they need captions. Coordination between different classes to ensure assignments aren't all bunched together. Recognition that group work is exceptionally difficult right now and there is not equal access to technology."

> "Put in standards that everyone follows, two of the 7 lectures engaged in Zoom, some used email and others did nothing. This need be addressed"

> "Educate lecturers on how to use online resources more efficiently."

> "Allow the recording of lectures so we can look back on them once the class is over. To do live lectures as this allows for time to discuss with lecturer and peers regarding the lecture and questions that may arise. This gives somewhat of an atmosphere of being in the classroom. The live lectures also give structure to the week as if we were in college."

> "Recording the labs that we are expected to carry out so we can see what we are supposed to do."

> "Hold live lectures, keep practical classes in college."

> "Introduce instant messaging on student site with online peers in class."

> "Set regular small assessments or assignments throughout the year to keep up motivation, and provide IT support particularly during exams."

> "Phone numbers for contacting people and lecturers."

> "All lecturers should be given a course on the best methods and formats to use when it comes to online communication and teaching."

3 General Findings

Undeniably, students in the Irish HEIs were affected by the psychological impact of COVID-19, personal circumstances, ill health, various ICT issues, lack of or little access to learning resources and necessary devices, and the bunching of assessments.

In purely quantitative terms, the main obstacle encountered by students replying to the survey was *'Lack of Motivation'*: more than three in four students felt that demotivation was the main obstacle (76.1% of all students selected this option). Other obstacles showing higher proportions were *'Bunching of Assessments'* (44.2% of all students selected this option), followed by *'Lack of Access to Specialised Equipment'* (39.9%) and *'Lack of Academic Support'* (37.6%).

The *'Lack of Motivation'* as an obstacle, was selected by most undergraduate degrees students. This percentage was particularly high among students from universities; followed by *'Bunching of Assessments'*. Among the institutes of technology, the *'Lack of Access to Specialised Equipment'* seems to have been an issue for undergraduate degree students (44% selected this obstacle). This speaks to the practical, hands-on nature of many of the technical programmes in the institutions (See Figure 11 below)[13].
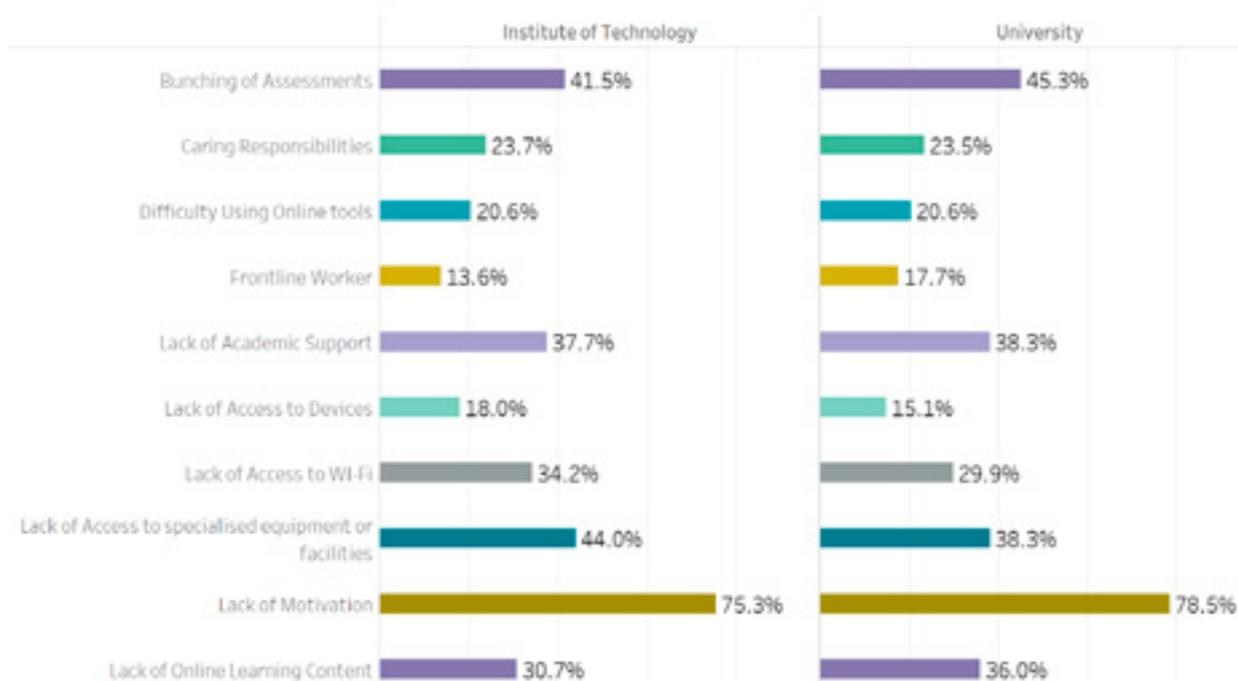
Figure 11 What were the main obstacles that you encountered? By type of HEI.
Source: Anonymised data from the USI COVID-19 survey.

The analysis of the main obstacles encountered by undergraduate students according to their stage of study reveals a similar pattern for 'First Year Continuing' students, Non-First Year Continuing' students and 'Non-First Year Graduating' students. However, there are noticeable differences, e.g. the *'Lack of Motivation', 'Lack of Academic Support'* and *'Lack of Online Learning Content'* were higher among 'Non-First Year Graduating' students (79.1%) than among others (See Figure 12 below)[14].

---

13 Based on students' responses from the IoTs and universities only.

14 Based on students' responses from the IoTs and Universities only.

Figure 12 What were the main obstacles that you encountered? By Stage. Source: Anonymised data from the USI COVID-19 survey.

Furthermore, more than half of all students replying to the survey (55.3%) felt that their personal circumstances were affected by the COVID-19 crisis.
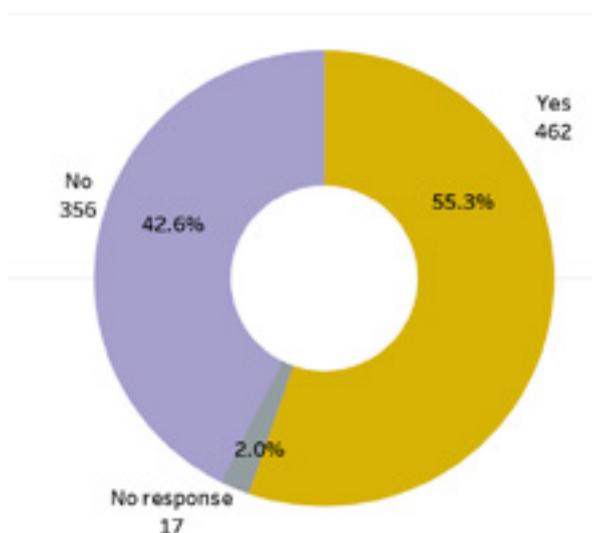

Figure 13 Did your personal circumstances change significantly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?
Source: Anonymised data from the USI COVID-19 survey.

It is evident that some HEIs/faculties/lecturers went above and beyond the call of duty in supporting students, giving commendable examples of student-centred learning practices. The evidence also indicates that this was not always the situation. In some cases, the 'bare minimum' approach, unengaging education and insufficient or lack of supportive measures in place made some individual students feel unmotivated, concerned, and disappointed.

Students who had enrolled in hands-on degree programmes made it very clear that online learning was not a good substitute for classroom learning which normally provides access to labs, tutorials, and to important work placements. Concerns around insufficient practical experience, achieving learning outcomes, and subsequently further employability were expressed occasionally, particularly by the final-year students.

3.1.1 What was lost with the changes (HE students' perspectives)

- learning topics in depth and understanding of the content being taught
- the clinical and personal element of the modules
- real-class environment
- crucial work experience
- meaningful engagement with other classmates
- a huge amount of lab experience was lost
- important field trips.

3.1.2 What worked well (HE students' perspectives):

- live lectures combined with asynchronous modes of online learning
- informal Zoom meetings/ fora for the class with the sole purpose of providing a means to engage with and support each other
- support measures for students with no access to devices.

3.1.3 What has potential to work well if improved (HE students' perspectives):

- fair access to devices for all learners
- one TLA platform and IT support and training for both students and teaching staff
- online learning content delivered in accessible manner to all students
- recorded live lectures with links to slides/reading material etc
- online calls and video chats to explain material and engage with students
- improved off-campus access to library and online databases and other online learning material
- timetable for online classes and assessments to avoid bunching.

3.2 Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies

Students on professionally accredited programmes stated that generally their HEIs were very slow in communicating implications stemming from COVID-19 for their placements. In these instances the HEIs were constrained by their dependence on the pace with which the relevant professional statutory recognition bodies could analyse the threats the crisis posed to students achieving and demonstrating relevant professional standards, approve deviations from normal practice and communicate these changed requirements to the HEIs.

"Yes, we didn't get moved to our third placement due to the risk of cross-contamination. However, we weren't told this information till very late, with people unsure whether to book accommodation or not."
"Our projects take place in hospitals, and the future of the project is being left up to the individual supervisor."
"They have not given any information to my year group (midwifery), some of whom have time to make up for placement before progressing."
"Communicated a change of placement (no second-year placement) but have never formally addressed the implications or if we will make up the time."

Almost half of all students (44%) on professionally accredited programmes felt that their HEI did not communicate with them about professional requirement implications stemming from COVID-19 (see Figure 14 below).
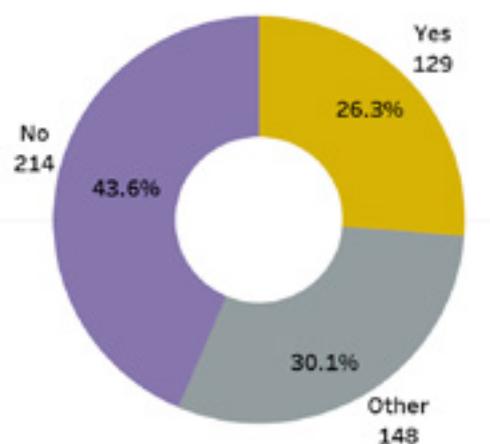
Figure 14 Students on professionally accredited courses e.g., Teaching, Nursing, Accountancy: Did your college communicate with you about any professional requirement implications stemming from COVID-19? e.g. Change to Placement. Source: Anonymised data from the USI COVID-19 survey.

Further analysis by type of HEI and level of study[15] show that of all undergraduate degree students replying to the survey, the majority (63%) felt that their HEI did not communicate with them about professional requirement implications stemming from COVID-19 (See Figure 15 below).

---

15 Only national students and undergraduate degree students were included in the analysis. 'Others', N/A, 'No response' categories were not included.
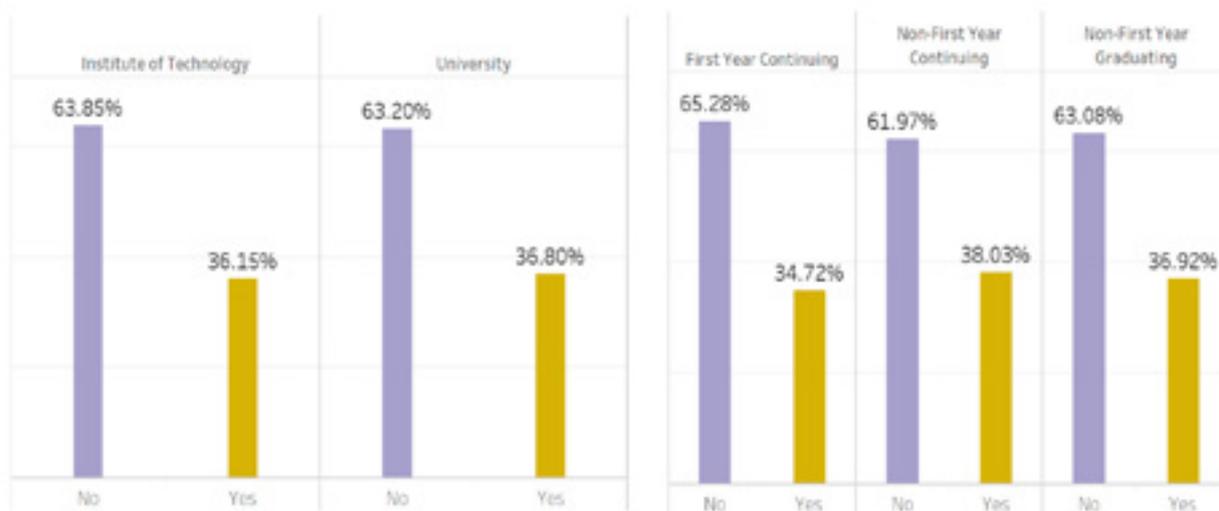
Figure 15 Students on professionally accredited courses: Did your college communicate with you about any professional requirement implications stemming from COVID-19? By type of HEI and stage. Source: Anonymised data from the USI COVID-19 survey.

3.3 Technology

This section focuses on the use of various technologies (ICT) and examines issues arising from the use of these technologies from home during COVID-19 from students' perspectives.

The analysis of qualitative data indicates that HEIs utilised the following TLA applications and platforms during the pandemic: Zoom, MS Teams, Moodle, Skype, YouTube, PowerPoint, LinkedIn, and in some instances even Facebook pages were used for communication enabling students to post queries. Zoom was also utilised to facilitate break-out rooms during Zoom classes interchangeably with live chats on Moodle. Some HEIs also had dedicated spaces (HEI Loop) for class discussions or used BigBlueButton (BBB). In addition, Blackboard, Padlet application, Panopto and Canvas were also utilised by lecturing staff.

The findings indicate that by and large, students suddenly deprived of regular peer-to-peer contact in many instances set up WhatsApp group chats, but also used Instagram, Facebook, and other apps and websites such as Messenger and Discord to engage with their classmates and support one another. Available data clearly shows that during the pandemic students relied on peer-to-peer support (See Figure 16) much more than upon college/faculty or teaching staff. 'Peer Support' was the main support for students (almost three quarters of all students replying to the survey selected this option).

Remote learning during the pandemic exposed inequalities among students in terms of access to devices, software packages and Wi-Fi. Due to different technological requirements and often limited capacity of devices, students would prefer their HEI to opt for only one TLA platform/software with the IT induction training on how to use the TLA platform provided for both students and lecturers.

> *"Devices were a huge issue. The software needed to complete [the] course was huge and not able to fit on a lot of laptops.*

> *"[...] I think a timetable should have been created and stuck with for online classes and all lecturers to use the same software for classes. Some were using Zoom and some were using Teams, others used YouTube. I found Teams to be better suited but either way it would have been better to have all using the same platform."*

Other notable comments from students regarding their personal experience of the digital learning environment:

> *"I think college should invest in Zoom premium so that it doesn't kick us out after 40 mins."*

> *"The success of online learning was dependent on the lecturer's ability with technology. Some were brilliant and others were not, but I realise this was suddenly thrust upon them. Internet quality caused problems for both students and lecturers."*

3.3.1 Key further needs and ideas (HE students' perspectives):

- Laptops/other devices loan system
- IT training and support on the use of required online platforms and applications (Zoom, MS Teams, Panopto, Padlet, Moodle etc.)
- IT support, particularly necessary during assessment
- Technical possibility to go back on questions during assessment
- Not to be required to upload images in PDF as it causes issues for upload
- Licences to certain software such as GSuite and Photoshop etc.
- Access items more efficiently.

3.4 Personal circumstances

This section outlines personal circumstances of students, briefly summarising their experience in the context of accessibility and e-learning environment during COVID-19.

Analysis of the students' perspectives regarding their personal circumstances.

Figure 16 below outlines the perspectives of students replying to the USI survey in relation to the main obstacles students encountered and the main support they relied upon.
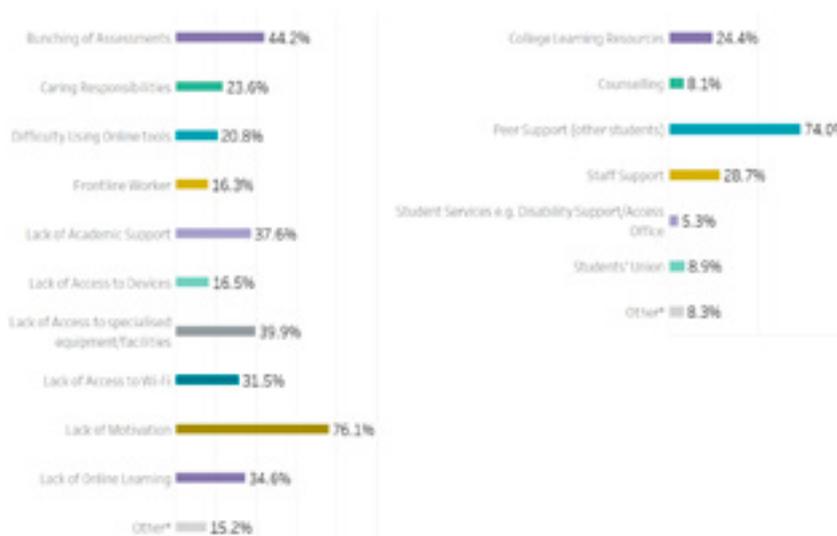

Figure 16 What were the main obstacles that you encountered and the main support that you relied upon?
Source: Anonymised data from the USI COVID-19 survey.

As mentioned before, the 'lack of motivation' was the main barrier for almost three in four students. It is also worthwhile noting that 'peer support (other students)' was the main support selected by most students. Figure 16 suggests that despite the efforts put in place by HEIs to deliver online teaching and learning processes of good quality, there is a need to build strategies that focus on addressing the interaction between students and motivation. This is consistent with other research that has flagged the impact of the pandemic on mental health[16][17] and worker wellbeing[18] in Ireland.

This seems to suggest that off-campus online learning cannot replace classroom-based face-to-face education and the full experience of college with regular social interactions.

Students also pointed to other challenges they faced during the crisis, such as:

- poor internet connection
- unreliable access to the internet and an unreliable laptop often shared with other members of the household
- difficulty using online tools
- distractions/caring duties/juggling college with work e.g. front-line workers
- lack or limited support for learners with disabilities
- lack or limited understanding of individual circumstances posed by COVID-19
- accommodation issues/lost employment, financial and funding concerns
- psychological impact of COVID-19.

Other notable comments from individual students regarding their personal circumstances and their experience of the remote learning environment:

"Lack of communication and vital resources made learning difficult [...] No accommodations made to students who were trying to balance working on the front line and keeping up to date with college work."
"I cannot express how much harder class became for me during this time. Students are expected to uphold standards during an extremely stressful time and within their homes where there are distractions, bad internet and with harder responsibilities such as caring for family members..."
"We were expected to know how to use different software/applications regardless of never having used them before."
"I do not own a laptop and had to attempt the assessments through a phone which was harder to navigate through."
"I felt the education imparted was very different and honestly took away the interest I had in my education."
"It was difficult to have access to materials and books."
"More compassionate approach that actually listens to students concerns, instead of lecturers taking online learning as a paid break. We pay for an education."

---

16 http://www.irishhealth.com/article.html?id=27329
17 https://www.irishpsychiatry.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Full-Report-of-Survey-to-Consultant-Psychiatrists-on-COVID19-impact-on-MHS-17.06.20.pdf
18 https://www.mhfaireland.ie/mhfanews

> *"It took a lot of motivation to start into work every day at home compared to going to college where the academic environment is more motivating."*

Not all comments were negative. Some students outlined very clearly that they were happy with no commuting, reduced travel costs and the opportunity to study at home at their own pace. Flexibility of online delivery was also appreciated.

> *"Because of not traveling to college I had more time in the day to work and was in an environment that became a great advantage to me."*

> *"Independent learning and autonomy when it came to time and time management."*

> *"Flexibility"*

> *"Less time spent on commuting, therefore more time at home to complete my tasks."*

> *"Being able to work at your own pace on a project."*

> *"I liked being able to review lectures coming up to exams I found that incredibly handy. It is not something our college provides normally."*

> *"Without my commute (2 hours each way to college every day) I was able to dedicate more time both to college and my other interests. No access to the library was a challenge, as was missing my friends/ social life in college. However, freedom from commuting was very beneficial."*

> *"No commute to and from exams. More comfort at home."*

> *"...I had 3 weeks of class time left and these were delivered online in a way that worked well for me. I commuted for my MA so it was a financial relief although with rural WIFI it was at times harder to participate..."*

> *"Working from home gives more comfort, motivation, and the most important time not spent on commuting."*

> *"Allowed for in-depth research rather than vague studying."*

The findings also show that some students found that they were being supported by their HEI in every possible way, while others felt that the level of support was not adequate.

> *"Where I am from originally, the internet access is very poor [...] The college provided students who had a lack of these facilities the opportunity to use the ones in the college, under strict guidelines."*

> *"We were told by the school that the change in circumstances would be taken into account, and that our GPA would not drop lower than what we had from continuous assessment during the semester. They also took measures to ensure we had support if we had poor internet which could cut out during the exams."*

> *"Lecturers were generally very supportive if I ran into an issue with my internet or if I felt like I couldn't get an assignment done on time. Most of my lecturers also made it clear that if I ever needed to talk to someone about how the lockdown was affecting me, they would set up a call to do so."*

> *"Some lecturers were very good with their material and getting back to emails, others were atrocious, student counselling services have been great."*

> *"I felt like I couldn't get as much help and advice for projects and problems I was facing"*

> *"Have had little to no contact from lecturers, extremely unsatisfactory and frustrating."*

> *"I felt very disconnected and alienated. The pressure of extra assignments and sudden changes severely affected my health and I found it difficult to access student services remotely."*

> *"I learned less from online lectures than I did in class and felt a severe lack of motivation."*

> *"We missed out on a huge amount of lab experience due to this, we missed out on crucial revision in a classroom environment and the support of friends…"*

> *"One video call a week […] A final year student needs more than just 1 video call a week for feedback on an ongoing major project that determines the grade of my degree. Disappointed to say the least."*

> *"I certainly feel my learning has been affected. The clinical and personal element of the module has been removed and it has lost that very necessary teaching which it would usually provide."*

> *"I am graduating so I won't be affected next year, however I do feel that the university should have implemented a safety-net policy, however they dragged their heels and as a result I know quite a few people who are worried about even moving on to next year."*

> *"We were supposed to go on work placement to get essential experience […] as many of us have never experienced this before. However, this was cancelled due to the pandemic which is understandable. Though, now most of us will not have the required […] experience which employers will be looking for when we graduate next year, and we will be less hireable."*

> *"…They were caught on the hop as we all were and did what they could, but it wasn't a gold standard education. It was making do in the circumstances. I'd worry that they think it was a success though and keep going that way."*

Drawing on the high-level secondary analysis of data on students 'attending' third-level education in Ireland during the period of the coronavirus, it is evident that students and HEIs were not only undeniably challenged by the unprecedented interruption posed by COVID-19 but also that approaches taken varied across HEIs, arguably resulting in very different experiences for students in Irish higher education institutions during the pandemic.

3.4.1 Lessons learned

We cannot judge the potential contribution of technology enhanced learning (TEL) to Irish HE on the basis of experiences in the unplanned emergency transition to remote teaching, learning and assessment. But we can learn something from the experience.

Technology offers great opportunities, but off-campus online training and education cannot replace classroom-based face-to-face education and the full experience of college with regular social interactions. Still, there exists considerable potential and scope for providing stimulating off-campus (online) learning experiences, provided that everyone has access to devices equipped with the necessary software and licences with ongoing IT support, with induction and training for both students and lecturers in tandem with engaging teaching material and every possible effort made to give students the best education and support within the limits of virtual academia.

CHAPTER 7: HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

1 Learners Engaged in Postgraduate Research

The COVID-19 social distancing restrictions impacted on learners engaged in postgraduate research (research degree students and postdoctoral researchers). Universities and the institutes of technology provide the bulk of research training in HE. The intensity of research activity varies widely between institutions. Therefore, we asked THEA and IUA to help with drafting this chapter which has also been informed by responses received directly from institutions.

1.1 Institutional responses to the COVID-19 challenges to postgraduate research activity

As campuses closed in response to government advice, research postgraduates pivoted, as far as possible, to desk-based work carried out from home. This included, e.g., carrying out literature reviews, writing journal articles and conference papers, thesis drafting and data analysis. Researchers in certain fields, such as ICT, were able to continue generating new research data remotely. However, researchers who require access to laboratories or other research facilities such as industry partner worksites, archives (often located outside of the HEIs) and high-performance computing facilities, were, for the most part, unable to generate new research data. The same situation applies to researchers who work with human subjects, such as those in health research and the social sciences.

Table 1 captures the main impacts of the pandemic on postgraduate research students, and some of the solutions that were put in place to mitigate the impact.

Table 1 Institutional responses to the COVID-19 challenges to postgraduate research activity.

Categories	Challenges	Examples of institutional responses
Campus access and access to other research facilities e.g. archives and print libraries	Campuses closed in line with government advice.	During the full lockdown, researchers were granted access on the basis of need e.g. to feed cells, water plants etc. Processes for requesting access and logging on-campus activity (sign-in, sign-out etc.) were put in place. Research students who needed to continue fieldwork that involves no contact with other persons were issued letters by their institution giving them permission to travel to the fieldwork sites. As researchers have begun to return to campus, online rotas/booking systems for laboratory access have become a very efficient way to offer and (to some extent) monitor access, and make the most of the available space. For example, researchers can visit the online booking system each day to see if new access timeslots have become available because a researcher has cancelled their pre-booked timeslot. This helps to avoid a situation where facilities are not being used at their maximum potential capacity. The **HSA Return to Work Safely Protocol** was adhered to following its publication.

Campus access and access to other research facilities e.g. archives and print libraries *cont.*	Research facilities external to HEIs unavailable e.g. National Library of Ireland, industry partner worksites.	None – access to research facilities external to HEIs is beyond their control.
Assessment for progression and for research degrees	Final year postgraduate students due to undertake viva voce during campus closure.	Viva voce exams were completed using video conferencing. The normal processes for the approval of results were used, involving appropriate committee(s) and/or academic councils.
	Exhibition element for final year postgraduate students in creative arts as part of viva voce.	Exhibitions completed using recorded videos, dedicated websites and such like were submitted to examiners prior to the viva voce.
	Postgraduate research student progression.	Progression reviews were completed using video conferencing. The normal processes for the approval of progression were used, involving appropriate committee(s) and/or academic councils.
Keeping research communities connected		Mechanisms were put in place to ensure on-going albeit remote supervisory contact between postgraduate research students and their supervisors. HEIs put in place new arrangements to help the research community stay connected. Examples: • Regular surveys of researchers (often weekly). • Online coffee mornings and journal clubs were organised to facilitate social and academic interaction. • WhatsApp groups were formed by Research Offices and used to engage with the research community.
Taught elements of structured research degree programmes	Taught elements of structured research degree programmes could not be delivered in-person (i.e. face-to-face).	Many taught elements of programmes are already delivered online. For those normally delivered in-person, some were pivoted to online delivery and others have been postponed until campus teaching facilities become fully operational.
Other Events	Campuses were closed in line with government advice. Pre-scheduled events were unable to take place on campus.	Important events in the calendar for researchers were pivoted from in-person events to fully-online events. This included annual postgraduate research colloquia and annual research poster competitions.

Research student stipends and fees	Concerns over external funders allowing stipend payments during campus closure.	Engagement with national funders determined that stipends should continue to be paid though no additional funding would be available for stipends to cover time needed to compensate for lost research activity. One initiative to limit the negative impact on students requiring submission deadline extensions into the next academic year is the waiving of fees normally paid through research grants for those students and the absorption of the costs within the HEI.
Recruitment	HEIs were unable to conduct the usual in-person interviews as part of recruitment of new research students for 20/21	Interviews for new students completed using videoconferencing.
Planning	Crisis management	Postgraduate research students were involved in campus crisis response teams and in developing return to work protocols and procedures.
Societal engagement		Some postgraduate research students were involved in initiatives to combat the pandemic, including manufacturing PPE, preparing reagents for use in COVID-19 testing for local healthcare facilities, and volunteering to assist with contact tracing.

1.2 Example

One institution that surveyed its students reported:

PhD Students

Several items were presented to PhD students only. These show that information on fees and scholarships were most likely to be said to be not going well, and that nearly 70% of PhDs reported Covid-19 represented a moderate or extreme interruption in their studies.

Please indicate how the following aspects of your research are going for you at the moment

	Not well at all	Not very well	Fairly well	Very well
Access to your supervisor(s)	1.4	8.1	41.9	48.6
Clarity with regard to academic matters (e.g., progression, modules)	13.5	24.3	33.8	28.4
Information on fees and scholarships	25.7	20.3	36.5	17.6
Access to internet or technical resources	5.4	18.9	35.1	40.5
Planning changes to your thesis	9.5	24.3	48.6	17.6

What level of interruption has taken place in your studies due to the Covid-19 pandemic?

	No interruption	Minor interruption	Moderate interruption	Extreme interruption
What level of interruption has taken place in your studies due to the Covid-19 pandemic?	8.1	21.6	32.4	37.8

Do you have access to sufficient online supports and resources to complete work relevant to your research (e.g., write up thesis chapters, lab work, contacts and networking?

	Yes	To some extent	No
Do you have access to sufficient online supports and resources to complete work relevant to your research (e.g., write up thesis chapters, lab work, contacts and networking?	33.8	58.1	8.1

Has your funding body or School / Institute research support offered advice on research timelines or extensions?

	Yes	No	I don't know
Has your funding body or School / Institute research support offered advice on research timelines or extensions?	41.9	39.2	18.9

Have you experienced an increase in your teaching / marking workload since the university closure

	None	Minor increase	Moderate increase	Large increase	Not applicable
Have you experienced an increase in your teaching / marking workload since the university closure	50.0	9.5	16.2	2.7	21.6

Figure 1 A result from a PhD student survey in one institution.

1.3 Lessons learned

The pandemic underlined the difference between the postgraduate researchers and non-research students. They are early stage researchers working in a professional environment, and that in the situation caused by the pandemic, it was found more appropriate to apply similar considerations to them as were applied to staff.

The situation caused by the pandemic highlighted the duty of care towards international research students as compared to domestic students. Institutions needed to increase the level of support offered to these students by research/graduate studies offices and student services units, as they did not have family support here in Ireland to assist them.

1.4 Future challenges

Return to Campus: As time has elapsed, the ability of researchers to fully deliver their programme of research while working from home has diminished. It is clear that they need access to campus, to other non-HEI-based research facilities, and to the human subjects that many perform their research with. Since the commencement of Phase 1 of the government re-opening roadmap, and the publication of the **HSA Return to Work Safely Protocol**, HEIs have been working on a phased return of research postgraduates (and research staff) to campus. However, the requirements around social distancing mean it is not possible to provide the same level of access to research facilities as was there prior to the pandemic. Naturally, it very much depends on the available space. In some research facilities, there may be as much as a 75% reduction in physical capacity. Short-term solutions to this include the use of undergraduate teaching facilities, which will allow for "catch-up" and for frontloading of data collection. However, these will not be available to the postgraduate research community after the summer period. The use of booking facilities and access rotas, as described above, are helpful. However it is clear that some research students will experience delays in gathering research data which will directly impact the duration of their studies and additional time will be required to complete their research to attain their qualification. The duration of such extensions will depend on the level of disruption experienced by the student related to their particular field of study.

Requests for deferral/extension: Already there is some evidence emerging of an increase in requests for deferral due to an inability of researchers to generate the research data necessary to advance their work. A number of HEIs have seen a growing increase in the number of requests from students to extend the completion date for their studies, in particular those due to complete in 2020. In an ideal world, HEIs would be in a position to offer costed extensions to postgraduate research students.

CHAPTER 8: INDEPENDENT HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

Contents

1 Respondent Context

Seventeen private higher education institutions (HEIs) submitted their reflections to QQI on the impact of the COVID-19-induced modifications to teaching, learning and assessment arrangements. Most submissions addressed three perspectives namely students, teaching staff and management, though not every submission addressed all three perspectives.

The numbers of staff and students who contributed to these submissions varied from provider to provider. They have been reported either as numbers of respondents (from 1 respondent to over 300) or as percentages of populations (between 47% and 100%). One institution's submission covered only their executive group's perspectives.

The feedback from students, staff and managers, which has informed the HEIs' submissions to QQI, was collected through student representatives, class reviews, staff meetings organised by programme boards, individual feedback as well as – in lots of cases – via online surveys.

The submissions focused on topics such as the main challenges and concerns, lessons learned, what worked well and what has the potential to work well after the crisis, high-level communications, change management processes, teaching and learning, assessment, technology and technical support, personal circumstances, future needs, challenges and future arrangements.

Full direct quotes, i.e. full sentences, from the providers' submissions are introduced between inverted commas. The content marked in italics throughout the text constitutes partial quotes from different submissions in an attempt to evidence original opinions, wording and findings.

2 Change Management

2.1 Approach

Some providers started considering the risks and impact of a possible closure of premises as early as February/March 2020 and this constituted the beginning of their COVID-19 contingency planning. This process consisted of proposing, agreeing to, communicating and implementing modifications to teaching, learning and assessment (TLA), operations, policies and protocols and other areas affected by the pandemic crisis.

In order to inform their proposed modifications, providers liaised with other HEIs, members of the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA), Department of Education and Skills, and QQI. Some also used the NFETL's 8-step *Guide to Developing Enabling Policies for Digital Teaching and Learning*[1].

One provider mentioned that the modifications they operated were mapped against QQI's *Guiding Principles for Alternative Arrangements*.

A number of providers reported that they have been updating their contingency plans regularly since March/ April 2020 to reflect potential additional risks, their impact and ways to respond to these.

Contingency plans had been submitted by providers for approval internally by the relevant committees and then submitted to QQI as information. As a result of such contingency planning, all organisational meetings and classes were moved online, work placements/ practical activities cut short and face-to-face assessment replaced by alternatives approved by their academic council/ committee. From a management point of view, the approach to change management focused on governance, quality assurance and consultations with students, staff and professional bodies.

---

1 https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/guide-to-developing-enabling-policies-for-digital-teaching-and-learning/

In addition to student and staff input, one provider also mentioned the national publications from USI and NStEP as a source used to inform decision-making.

2.1.1 Governance

In addition to moving all committee meetings online, providers noted the necessity to increase the number of additional executive meetings at least initially. One provider established a COVID-19 *Monitoring and Response Team* to identify the risks of COVID-19 and work on contingency plans and another provider reported the establishment of an *Academic Council standing committee* to address urgent matters between academic council meetings. Another provider noted the establishment of a *subcommittee of the academic council to ensure consistent consideration of academic modifications.*

2.2 Policies and procedures

The main modifications to QA arrangements involved the following:

- developing or modifying QA policies relevant to online teaching, learning and assessment arrangements such as online etiquette, GDPR, confidentiality, integrity, etc.
- ensuring clarity regarding suitable supports and reasonable accommodations in the online context (e.g. medical certificates made non-compulsory in certain circumstances)
- amending and adapting forms and procedures for COVID-19-related requests, processes and applications in order to reduce paperwork and the response time
- developing a COVID-19-specific risk register
- diversifying the range and increasing the number of methods used for gathering and acting upon feedback from students and staff
- documenting all changes related to teaching and assessment and submitting them for approval by the relevant internal committees
- adapting regulations to reflect the specific requirements of the alternative assessments including scenarios related to late/ non-submission of assessments due to online access issues and difficulties encountered in the assessment of work placements/ practical skills
- developing protocols around the range of support services (IT, mentoring, wellbeing, etc.) offered online.

2.2.1 Consultations with students, staff and professional bodies

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on organisational processes and all providers recognised the necessity to consult with students, staff and professional bodies in order to make suitable modifications.

Student participation at meetings was generally recognised as strong and *helpful* and *students were grateful for being heard*. Online polls, surveys, direct individual feedback and feedback via class representatives were the main ways students were consulted regarding the upcoming modifications.

"Student Representative Committee members were consulted on a sometimes, daily basis throughout the planning process for modifying TLA and it was very beneficial to everybody to have learner voice central to all decision making."
Academic leader/Management perspective

Some providers have also reported extensive consultations with their academic development teams, teachers, management, and administrative staff. In several institutions, staff members already had experience in online delivery and could advise from their own direct experience.

Regarding consultation with professional bodies, a number of providers reported a lack of communication and slowness in receiving clarification on practice placements early on in the crisis. However, some of these providers also mentioned that such issues were resolved either early or subsequently. Most providers indicated extensive communication with professional bodies to enable them to support students in these areas. Providers have also mentioned that this is an area that will need to be addressed again in the near future to clarify acceptable alternative options for work placements.

"Discussions at a national level will be required to find a range of acceptable alternative options so students are not adversely impacted by the COVID crisis in terms of placement hours/ practices/learning outcomes." **Executive group perspective**

2.3 Challenges

In addition to the limited time to address the move from face-to-face to online/ distance provision, one of the key challenges mentioned by many respondents in their submissions to QQI was identifying and addressing issues related to personal circumstances of their staff and students. These are various, ranging from balancing work/ study and personal life commitments to managing their own underlying health conditions, caring for elderly or high-risk family members, and finding alternatives to the lack of childcare facility. There are also concerns related to mental health due to isolation, temporary or permanent loss of employment, uncertainty related to the future, the intense COVID-19 media coverage and the lack of a proper study space (due to family distractions or shared accommodation).

The key challenges identified by the respondents in executing the approved TLA modifications can be seen in the table below. These have been categorised under internal and external challenges to the institutions.

Table 1 – Key challenges in executing the COVID-19-induced modifications by HEIs.

Internal challenges	External challenges
• the limited timeframe for modifications to QA and TLA determined by the urgency of the pandemic • ensuring all risks were identified and suitable contingency plans to mitigate these were put in place, including updating these when necessary • prioritising regular, smooth and prompt contact and communication with students and staff • factoring in the personal circumstances, wellbeing and mental health of both students and staff • managing the increased workload generated by concurrently working to meet the requirements of regulatory and professional bodies and managing significant internal changes (this was particularly challenging for small providers) • having to distribute programme materials by post as some students had no access to a printer at home • ensuring access to reliable internet and suitable online resources as well as training for staff and students	• ensuring smooth and prompt communication with professional and regulatory bodies • meeting regulatory requirements and demands • ensuring that professional bodies approved the proposed course changes in a timely manner • agreeing on alternative arrangements to work placements with different stakeholders

In spite of a multitude of challenges, providers reported very useful extensive consultations with staff and students and a general attitude of cooperation which helped with implementing suitable modifications.

In order to respond to the challenges mentioned above, providers initiated a series of supports for students and staff.

Table 2 – Supports for staff and students provided by HEIs.

Supports for staff	Supports for students
• regular and consistent support as well as individual and group online training on the use of different online resources • consideration of personal circumstances • one-to-one updates and wellbeing checks • online social activities and events • increase in the quantity and variety of mental health supports and wellbeing services provided or facilitated • IT training and support during and outside class times	
• regular and consistent technical support as well as individual and group online training on the use of different online resources • regular communication regarding online teaching and assessment between academic managers and programme staff • guidelines and one-to-one support around exam correction (including the technology used for this) and maintenance of academic integrity for staff • online continuous professional development (CPD) including peer learning opportunities and professional development toolkits and bulletins containing useful video guides, webinars and recordings for staff • equipment for remote teaching • mutual support and collaboration between the teaching and the non-teaching staff • additional organisational arrangements made available to staff in order to assist them with their decision-making	• detailed information on modified teaching and assessment including step-by-step guides, tutorials and documents • regular contact and communication with students by both academic and non-academic staff • approval of assessment extensions and programme deferrals where possible • possibility to self-certify for extenuating circumstances • live Q & A sessions, webinars and clinics • training, guidance and resources on academic integrity including information on the new laws in Ireland regarding prosecution of academic cheating and contract cheating services • trial sessions organised before exams to ensure students understood the exam protocols as well as calls with the academic support team to discuss issues related to assessment • prompt provision of online/ distance counselling (in different languages where necessary), library and disability support services • including students and student feedback in the decision-making process • student support services extended to outside office hours and after end of semester • specialist software and laptop loan scheme available on and off campus to ensure students' access to suitable devices for study

The majority of students and staff though felt they were provided with good academic and pastoral support while learning and teaching remotely and that their personal circumstances were taken into account as much as possible.

A significant number of providers reported spending an increased number of hours on communication with students through email, online platforms and phone calls. One provider even reported that calls doubled during the period as students were concerned about programme completion and other matters.

A series of external supports could be accessed by providers among which the most referenced were the very useful documentation, organisational guidance and/ or guidelines and directives from:

- The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (NFETL)
- Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)
- The UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)
- Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC)/Pearson
- The Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA)
- The Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA)
- The Higher Education Colleges Association Academic Quality Enhancement Forum (HAQEF)
- Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (IACP)
- The Teaching Council
- Department of Education and Skills
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)
- other HEIs' official published arrangements.

2.4 Lessons learned

The main lessons learned by providers were that *adaptability should be an integral aspect of institutional processes and structures*, and that clear leadership and investment in staff capacity and ICT infrastructure were essential. In their adaptation to the new reality, several providers also recognised that a crucial element in implementing major changes is clear and consistent communication with all students, staff and stakeholders through suitable channels.

Building feedback from all stakeholders into the system and continued focus on national and international, particularly European, developments in relation to the quality assurance of online provision were mentioned as well. In relation to online provision, it was noted that flexibility and creativity in finding alternative tools, methodologies and platforms to achieve the proposed learning outcomes was a great advantage.

Many providers emphasised the intensive liaison with professional and academic accrediting bodies to ensure modifications were suitable and that they did not impact on student progression.

2.5 High-level communications

An especially important part of contingency planning was the communication with staff, students and stakeholders. This involved identifying the most suitable communication channels and finding an adequate tone and style of communication.

High-level communication with staff and students was generally done via a dedicated online COVID-19 updates section on institutions' websites, regular email and online meetings, and instant messaging

tools. Most providers have reported an increase in the contact with staff and students regarding contingency plans, class arrangements, class plans, guidelines for the use of online resources and additional support provided in response to student feedback. One provider noted the following: "Moving from a push notification system to a pull system through Moodle has resulted in all students and lectures [sic] engagement with the VLE as it became to [sic] 'to go' place for information. Rather than people continuously asking the same questions – a central information resource became operational at last." Some providers ensured that students were contacted by mobile phone in order to ascertain their wellbeing and identify the best channels of communication available to each student. Other means of communication and opportunities used to disseminate high-level messages were virtual clinics, *townhall meetings* and helplines, extended virtual office hours, video messages from senior management, regular newsletters/ bulletins, FAQs, live Q&As and webinars.

Providers reporting on their communication with stakeholders noted the clear and prompt response from QQI as a regulator and from some of the professional bodies. Extensive communication with these three stakeholders has been mentioned by most providers.

3 Teaching and Learning

3.1 Approach

The time and nature of the COVID-19 emergency did not allow sufficient time for planning or development of tried-and-tested online resources and content.

Providers entered the COVID-19 crisis with different levels of experience in online delivery amongst their staff. At one extreme, there were providers whose teaching methodologies needed massive adjustment, involving considerable planning and staff training while at the other extreme certain providers already had blended learning procedures approved by QQI, in which case the changes required were described as minimal. However, the vast majority of cases fell between these two extremes.

Lecturers experienced a different teaching environment in which face-to-face contact was totally replaced by online provision where they had to use different technologies to enable them in delivering synchronous and asynchronous classes and to communicate with students. A variety of VLEs and support programmes were mentioned such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, the Google+ suite, Moodle, etc.

In many instances, lecturers reported no difference in approach between award stage and non-award stage. Only a few providers noted differences between the two stages in relation to dissertations and work placements. One provider reported that lecturers found award-stage students to be more engaged in classes than those in non-award stages.

Several responses pointed to feedback from students and academic staff detailing lack of access to physical libraries (although in some cases these were replaced by online libraries/ resources); one provider mentioned that some of their teachers felt that *lecturers had to compensate for student's lack of library access by locating and uploading extra reading material to Moodle.*

One submission mentioned the support provided to dissertation students to complete their research by sometimes *changing the focus of dissertations from fieldwork to desk-based research*.

Contingency plans were also needed for students completing practice placements on certain programmes when these placements had to be cut short.

3.2 Challenges

Anxiety around internet use and transition to VLEs/ other online platforms was noted by some lecturers and students especially in contexts which involved practical activities, where it was more difficult to gauge student performance. Less student-lecturer interaction was also reported and fewer opportunities to organise simultaneously supervised groupwork by lecturers. Despite this, some providers have noted that the transition from face-to-face/ blended learning to online learning was so successful that it developed a *significant sense of achievement* in staff and institutions.

Some lecturers reported that the move to online provision generally facilitated students making their voices heard in ways (e.g. chat facilities/ online forums for the shy students) that do not usually happen with face-to-face interactions; the *drawback* however was that learners may *self-disclose more freely here than in face-to-face sessions and may regret this later*, as noted in one response.

The level of student engagement seems to depend on the level of experience in using online tools for content delivery by different lecturers and the level of technical support offered to lecturers and students when needed (the lack of this created anxiety and the feeling that people were *at the mercy of online technology*). The lack of social interaction – which was noticed by lots of lecturers and students – was in some cases overcome using the text/ chat /forum functions of different online resources and VLEs.

The main challenges mentioned by staff and students from a technological point of view were in relation to access to reliable internet and sharing devices with family members. Lecturers have also identified IT equipment which is fit for purpose as a requirement.

International students reported anxiety associated with concern for their families back home, potential loss of employment and visa-related matters.

While certain students appreciated the opportunity to study from home at their own pace, many students, especially international students, live in shared accommodation without a suitable study space. Physical libraries would have been the usual study place for such students before the pandemic. Others, especially mature students, reported that the presence of children and general childcare commitments made finding a quiet space and time to study and complete assessments difficult.

Trying to balance work and personal life commitments was another challenge especially for staff who were used to face-to-face interactions with students and colleagues; these felt that working from home made them feel that they should always be *available*.

Some other staff and students reported feeling isolated from their colleagues and missing face-to-face interaction.

The table below shows what worked well, what could have been improved and what could have been done differently from a lecturer's perspective.

Table 3 – Synopsis of lecturers' opinions on how the COVID-19-induced modifications worked.

Worked well	Could have been improved	Could have been done differently
• the switch to online provision, which meant adding efficiency by removing considerable commuting time in some cases • staff felt encouraged to experiment with and learn new skills via the use of various online teaching resources • the flipped classroom and the problem-solving approaches, practical clinics, recording of assignment brief instructions, frequent staff meetings • it was generally felt that the IT and admin teams showed support and flexibility • the new TLA environments supported teachers in finding new ways of interacting with their students and allowed them to use a *student-first approach* • increased attendance by students • it was felt that students took more responsibility in contributing to the learning environment and asked fewer irrelevant questions	• lack of a sufficient timeframe to develop a cohesive tried-and-tested programme plan for online learning • working out which online tools are suitable for different student groups and trying to avoid confusing students by using too many different online methods of delivery/ tools • difficulty in assessing the level of student interest and understanding, pacing the class correctly, and ensuring whole class engagement in the absence of face-to-face interaction and non-verbal communication, especially when students were reluctant to turn their cameras on or speak online • managing students' expectations in terms of online classes • maintaining students' enthusiasm during longer lectures • trying to manage the chat window while lecturing • *training in technology use, while substantial, had been technology-focused rather than curriculum-focused* • *reassuring staff that everything was going well*	• more training and guidance in using different ICT tools and platforms in teaching • more time to prepare lectures and materials specifically for online delivery • ensuring more interaction and participation from students by using more interactive online tools and limiting class sizes • *shorter live sessions and podcast type videos for additional support* • *a unified approach to tools and platforms* • more clearly defined student expectations • *make online resources available to teachers on how to care for their voice* • better choice of online resources for different groups of students and different types of lectures • more online practical and experiential activities • more short live lectures at different times/ on different days • more individual feedback to students • more brainstorming by staff • clearer guidelines for staff and students that can be used in cases of technology failure • additional assessors to share the workload • longer and more frequent breaks

According to the feedback received from students, these are the main modifications that worked well, could have been improved and could have been done differently.

Table 4 – Synopsis of students' opinions on how the COVID-19-induced modifications worked.

Worked well	Could have been improved	Could have been done differently
• not having to commute to college • staff willingness to support • mix of lecturers to expose students to different teaching styles • peer-to-peer discussions via breakout/ chat rooms • *online group process sessions allowed some students to self-disclose in a way that they found difficult face-to-face* • access to online resources from the library • the flexibility of being able to access recordings of live lectures in students' own time and thus allowing time for personal commitments • receipt of regular feedback from lecturers • consultation with students thus offering them the opportunity to partake in decision-making	• internet connectivity and suitability of devices (e.g. no access to camera, microphone or a suitable study space to use these if existent) • participation in lectures and better contributions as sometimes this was difficult due to internet issues, shyness/ online anxiety and personal circumstances • access to enough reading material to address research requirements in the absence of a physical library • online resources provided by colleges were not always sufficient • early termination of work placements • uncertainty regarding ability to meet requirements for registration with different professional bodies • ensure less of a gap between different teaching styles (very interactive lectures vs. text-heavy slides read by lecturers) • better flexibility on assignment submission deadlines • earlier and more frequent communication from the college	• more feedback elicited from students and greater attention to students' personal circumstances and needs when planning modifications to teaching and learning • more induction sessions and additional supports in order to facilitate online learning • fewer assumptions about students' technology abilities • fewer assignments • more interactive sessions • more interaction with lecturers and peers • slow or delayed responses from lecturers due to increased teaching preparation demands, in which case additional academic support is necessary • lack of suitable study space in the absence of access to a physical library • *need for actual lectures, not just uploading of notes* • more revision classes • more in-advance planning and timetabling when moving skills modules and placements online

The vast majority of students and staff who contributed to the feedback submitted to QQI reported feeling comfortable and confident in the technology platforms and tools used and the majority reported finding the transition easier than expected.

Those providers who – as part of their approved blended learning quality assurance procedures had VLEs and different online technologies in use before COVID-19 – had a significant advantage over other providers. Lecturers also noted that the range of technology available – including Moodle, Zoom, PowerPoint, Vimeo, Microsoft Teams, Padlet, different podcasts, Slack, Mentimeter, Kahoot, etc. –

provided useful means of communication for teaching and learning, which they could adapt to their modules; however, they also highlighted the importance of deciding on the most suitable technology and using this consistently.

Both teachers and students were generally supported by providers in accessing the software necessary for teaching, learning and assessment. Different options, from online and phone induction to instant messaging, were used to ensure students and staff received support.

3.3 Standards

Predominantly, teaching staff as well as students felt academic standards were maintained in both the award and non-award stage teaching. Learning outcomes remained the focus of work for all teachers. However, not all providers submitted a response in relation to standards.

Lecturers in practical subjects noted that learning outcomes were met differently.

4 Assessment

4.1 Approach

The approaches to assessment varied according to the different programmes and modules offered by providers.

Assessments that were under normal circumstances delivered face-to-face, under supervision, were replaced with alternative assessments or alternative ways of demonstrating that the intended learning outcomes had been achieved.

Face-to-face exams were replaced in the majority of cases with online exams (e.g. mainly invigilated or non-invigilated open-book format exams, and quizzes). Face-to-face case presentations by students were replaced with online presentations, either recorded or taking place in real time. Some written exams were replaced with online continuous assessment.

Other assessment alternatives used were open-book case studies, essays, reviews, reflections, work placement reflections, group and individual projects.

Significant changes were necessary in relation to the assessment of practice placements. Placement portfolios replaced these in some instances.

One provider noted the following: "In the area of research, for some cohorts, submission dates were extended, and students were issued with guidance on data collection in the constrained circumstances. For other cohorts the research project will now comprise of a desk-based research project."

Extended deadlines for assignment submissions or reductions in word count where possible allowed one provider to take personal circumstances relating to COVID-19 into account promptly. This measure was proposed in order to *facilitate students under pressure to evidence their learning* and was approved by the relevant internal committee with the understanding that it would not impact on academic standards.

Some increase in requests for extensions were noted generally.

In terms of quality assurance for the award year, assessments were discussed and reviewed with external examiners to ensure validity and reliability. A *template for changes to assessments* was

developed by one provider which specifically *addressed potential changes to module learning outcomes*. Assessment changes were generally agreed by programme boards, external examiners and academic council.

Twenty-three out of 25 private HEIs surveyed by QQI recently did not notice any significant change in assessment outcomes compared to previous years.

4.2 Challenges

Some providers reported that assessments, especially group assessments and group presentations, were difficult to manage online initially. Out-of-class groupwork appeared to be more problematic due to technical issues and personal circumstances.

"The workload in preparing alternative assessments was quite intense in the time frame allowed. Time frame equating to assessment expectations will be considered more going forward." **Teacher/tutor perspective**

One provider noted their teachers' *difficulty in designing problem-based assessments that required application of learning and knowledge rather than theoretical questions that could be copied and pasted*. In addition, the same provider reported that another difficulty encountered by their teaching staff was in *designing assessments knowing that students had various means of sharing information in real time*. As a result, the workload of some lecturers increased compared to before COVID-19.

Lecturers also had difficulty *in finding appropriate replacements for practical assessment elements such as presentations, groupwork, and/or poster presentations.*

"Fairness is reliant on all students having equal access to good Wi-Fi and technology". **Teacher/ tutor perspective**

Online invigilation was difficult for exams and fluctuation in Wi-Fi channel capacity was also a major issue for both staff and students.

Some students reported a need for more clarity in terms of the procedures and timings around online and take-home exams and other students mentioned a lack of resources in completing certain assignments.

4.3 What worked well

A large number of students – especially those with disabilities and those who suffer with exam anxiety – felt the take-home exam suited them better and they could show their knowledge of the exam topics more effectively and clearly.

Some students welcomed the opportunity to type answers in the exam, rather than handwriting them; other students were happy with the additional time given as part of the exams and some students found the choice of printing the exam paper before the exam useful.

Where received, regular feedback from lecturers was identified as a positive for all student groups.

Technical support and preparatory webinars were cited as helpful as well.

Some lecturers felt that the take-home exams worked well although some anxiety around this method of assessment was mentioned because of concerns related to academic integrity. Students engaged with the online resources provided in a positive way, with less cramming and memorisation, which are typical features of traditional face-to-face invigilated written exams. One provider mentioned having provided a *Guide to Take-Home Exams* to learners as guidance together with information on the modifications related to TLA.

4.4 Academic integrity

Responders highlighted academic integrity as a very important area for consideration as there was concern that alternative assessments could favour increased academic misconduct. Some lecturers expressed anxiety in relation to the fact that not all plagiarism is detected by the various plagiarism detection software programmes. Several providers reported significant and additional work having taken place at different levels in their institutions in order to promote academic integrity. In order to improve students' understanding of sound academic conduct, providers made additional resources available to students such as FAQs, links to the QQI website referring to this topic, and different guidelines (on referencing, take-home exams, academic writing, etc.). One provider introduced compulsory online "disclaimers" to be signed by students.

"Ensuring that learning outcomes were fair and in line with the original form of assessment was a challenge, but academic integrity was central to the process and was not impacted." **Teacher/ tutor perspective**

Academic integrity is also supported by other extra security measures being taken such as extra vigilance in checking student IDs, particularisation of tasks, use of plagiarism checkers and document tracing, extra training for staff and students on the topic, engagement of students and staff in devising or amending academic integrity policies, introduction of a code of honour for online tests, completion of exams in Notepad rather than Word (to avoid autocorrection – mainly in foreign language tests), and relevant guidelines sent to assessors.

5 Future Considerations

The future challenges identified by management staff related to *responding to student number uncertainty, maintaining programme currency and relevance*, securing high quality provision under the current circumstances, arranging suitable work placement options, ensuring all staff receive the necessary training to respond to the new COVID-19 realities, ensuring all the necessary measures are put in place and adhered to if colleges can reopen their premises, maintaining staff morale, vision and ethos.

Students' future concerns related to securing work placements, having a suitable space to study and a suitable device/ internet connection, balancing study and personal life commitments, staying connected and building a sense of community with peers and teachers, finding motivation to study, securing the financial resources needed for college life, and dealing with change of work arrangements (in the case of those students who have lost jobs).

Teachers and students mentioned various challenges related to student engagement, TLA activities and challenges due to the COVID-19 restrictions. These have been summarised in the table below.

Table 5 – Future challenges from teachers' and students' perspective

Challenge category	Teachers	Students
Student engagement	• building rapport • ensuring interactive lectures • managing student anxiety	• Lack of opportunities to interact with peers outside the virtual class setting • lack of interactivity of some lectures • gaining confidence in the providers' processes and policies
TLA activities	• *fully embracing an effective blended learning approach* • *focusing on the delivery of learning outcomes and not just on lecture content* • *facilitating experiential work online* • becoming more confident in the new TLA approaches • finding suitable online resources • motivating student	• need for more structured timetables of live lessons • overassessment • realistic exam requirements in terms of size and time allocated • teaching approaches that focus on extensively long texts and videos • need for more practical or applied activities • lack of access to suitable devices, reliable internet and adequate learning resources
Challenges due to the COVID-19 crisis	• working from home • balancing work and personal life commitments • showing flexibility towards and supporting students • *building on the lessons from the crisis and being adequately prepared*	• studying from home without access to a suitable study space • balancing work and personal life commitments • more training needed on how to use the resources made available by providers with continuous support for the students who are in difficulty • additional online resources especially when a physical library is not available

In order to improve their teaching, learning and assessment, teachers identified a series of requirements which revolve around the need for assistance with technology and regular CPD, home working resources, recognition of the increased workload associated with adapting the existing face-to-face material for delivery via online provision, peer and organisational support.

6 Conclusions

A general theme from the submissions that, in spite of the disruptions and the ad-hoc solutions proposed, everyone appreciated the efforts made by all stakeholders involved to make the new reality work for everyone concerned.

While some students and teachers found the new COVID-19 college reality particularly challenging and at times overwhelming, many referenced it as a mostly *interesting* and *enjoyable* experience *resulting in fun classes* and offering various opportunities for further personal and professional development.

Providers reported that the vast majority of their students and staff were very supportive with respect to the implementation of contingency plans.

The transition to remote learning during the COVID-19 crisis situation has not allowed providers to show their full potential in terms of using virtual environments due to the urgency of making the move from face-to-face to technology-assisted/ online TLA. Further research is needed on the effectiveness of blended and online learning, the adequacy of work placement arrangements and online platforms for skills practice, the various methodological approaches such as the flipped classroom as well as the diverse ICT resources available to providers, students, and teachers in order to ensure preparedness for future challenges that may arise during the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, future opportunities in terms of TLA may also be identified and realised in innovative and creative ways.

Last but not least, the necessity to conduct further studies on the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of staff and students in an educational setting was mentioned by many respondents in their submissions.

CHAPTER 9: HEAnet

1 Introduction

HEAnet played a central role during the COVID-19 emergency transition phase for the institutions and contributed to the Department of Education and Skills Tertiary Education System (TES) *Steering Group* on a range of connectivity and support issues. HEAnet also chaired the *Connectivity Working Group* which continues to identify connectivity challenges and develop solutions in relation to broadband, data, networks and devices.

The remit of the *Connectivity Working Group* was

• to identify connectivity challenges in relation to broadband, data, networks and devices
• to develop solutions for challenges and work through their resolution with third parties
• to provide advice and guidance to other working groups in relation to technology and connectivity.

We met with HEAnet to discuss our TLA project. HEAnet kindly provided the following statement.

2 HEAnet Submission to QQI TLA Project – June 2020

HEAnet is Ireland's National Education and Research Network, providing Internet connectivity and associated ICT shared services across all levels of the Irish education system. We provide a range of services to our clients and users throughout Primary, Secondary and Tertiary education in Ireland, as well as to a number of Government agencies and other public bodies.

These services are common, repeatable and sharable across our client base. Importantly, they must also be reliable and easy to use.

The full range of HEAnet services can be found here: https://www.heanet.ie/services

We work to ensure that services are resilient and are updated to suit client needs. While there were few, if any, specific changes made to services in light of Covid-19, this was because these services were already securely accessible from anywhere on the Internet.

At the core of secure access is the Edugate Identity Federation - https://www.heanet.ie/services/identity-access/edugate - which allows users to access a range of online services using their home institution user credentials. These online services encompass libraries, academic journals, email and collaboration software, online portals and stores, and many more. This access doesn't rely on the user being on campus, rather it provides a link between the institutional authentication and the online service, and makes remote learning and researching so much easier.

HEAnet's Brokerage service - https://www.heanet.ie/brokerage - facilitates client access to procurements and framework deals on hardware, software and managed services. Through this service, institutions and individual users can access a range of different products and services, in compliance with public procurement guidelines and in an efficient and speedy manner. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this service has enabled learners to access the software they need to continue their studies, and also allowed students and academic staff to obtain laptops and other hardware at reduced prices from the HEAnet Store https://www.heanet.ie/store

While all HEAnet staff moved to work from home on Friday March 13th, we continued to provide normal service to our clients. This was through use of our own tools and followed several successful DR/BCP tests which simulated loss of access to our office.

During this time we received a number of requests from clients for support in moving parts of their operation online. We observed a number of changes in service usage, detailed below, and dealt with a number of individual requests for service enhancements.

Network Usage: The HEAnet IP network, one of the core services we provide to our clients, has experienced a dramatic reduction in usage as students and staff moved away from their campuses and offices. On average, network usage has reduced by ~75% during this period. However, the drop in usage did not in any way change the reliance on the core network, nor its need to be fast and reliable as there was still a need to access core services on multiple campuses. These services would vary on an institution by institution basis, but examples would include user directory services and financial systems. In addition, while the continued expansion of the network to new sites paused in March/April, we were required to connect some sites as a priority to aid Covid-19 related research and as lockdown ends, less critical site works are returning to normal.

Virtual Learning Environments: HEAnet provide a small number of clients with their Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs). With a move to total online learning and online exams, we were required to increase the resources devoted to these services. The clients in question completed their online summer exams without any issues being reported to us.

Edugate Federation: Logins to services accessed via HEAnet's federated identity service, Edugate, increased during the period March – July 2020 when compared to the same period in 2019. However, the numbers continue to show strong usage, rather than any large change in behaviour. This suggests that students were using the service in the same way off-campus as they were on-campus, which would be in line with our expectations.

2019: 13,511,967 logins with 264,049 unique users accessing 511 unique services

2020: 14,071,2440 logins with 277,748 unique users accessing 539 unique services

Other Online Services: Several other services, such as our FileSender file transfer service, experienced a large uptick in usage. Between January and June 2020, we have observed ~225,000 uploads to this service, this is compared against a total of ~175,000 uploads during the entire of 2019.

In addition to our core service support HEAnet has been working with the Department of Education and Skills. In March/April we worked with mobile phone providers to ensure zero rating of Irish educational resources on mobile data plans. We are also working with DES to determine in what other ways we can support education in Ireland into the new academic year.

Libraries: The LIR HEAnet User Group for Libraries provides a forum for discussion on the use of electronic resources and networks by HEI libraries and assists in development and training for their effective use. https://lirgroup.heanet.ie/

In the past 18 months this group has provided training on Library Data Carpentry with a series of classes at the LIBER conference in UCD in 2019.

Since the start of April 10 classes have been run virtually using Zoom with an average of 10 attending each class.

Participants have been from libraries throughout the country and this online training has also received international interest with requests to participate in upcoming classes.

Classes topics have included: Unix Commands, OpenRefine, SQL, Introduction to Git, Version Control with Git and GitHub.

This group has now eight qualified trainers in these topics and will continue to provide a program of online training over the next year.

3 Conclusion

Overall, HEAnet are very happy with the level of service we have continued to provide to our clients, and we are sure we can build on this in the "new normal." Our experiences match those of other equivalent bodies around Europe and the world, and we are working with them, and the pan-European body GÉANT, to ensure we are aware of all upcoming services and opportunities.

CHAPTER 10: REFLECTIONS

Overall, the pivot succeeded, but not for everybody

While many HE students were satisfied or at least neutral[1] overall, there were some students who were dissatisfied with various aspects of how things were handled. Some of this is inevitable e.g. dissatisfaction about the loss of things precluded by COVID-19 realities, but not all of it can be attributed to this and the identification of the challenges they faced may suggest opportunities to enhance the response for 20/21.

For further education, the learner survey data suggest that the majority of learners felt confident in their ability to complete their assessments and felt that they were fair. Staff teaching learners on programmes at NFQ Levels 1-3 found it challenging to engage these learners in remote assessment and for some cohorts at these levels the majority of certification was deferred until the autumn.

Responses from practitioners, AHEAD and AONTAS suggest that some marginalised and vulnerable groups were particularly disadvantaged by the experience of remote teaching and learning.

This report has identified challenges faced by students and staff. These will be useful to concerned actors when seeking to enhance future remote experiences for teachers and learners.

The tertiary education system responded

The response of tertiary education institutions to the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the complicated nature of their operating environment. To understand what happened it may be helpful to view the tertiary education system more as a social system than a deterministic, rules-based one. What we mean by this is that the regulatory flexibility within the tertiary system enabled people to adapt (to learn, to innovate, to solve problems, to get things done) and the strength of the system's constituent communities of practice helped to support standards.

Tertiary education staff met the challenge presented by moving online. There was considerable behind-the-scenes coherence and joined-up thinking in evidence across the tertiary system within and between institutions.

It would be difficult not to be impressed by how the TES managed to finish out the academic year under the COVID-19 restrictions within the normal timescale and lay down the groundwork for the next one.

Students are an influential group and they support each other

Students are an influential group in Ireland's education system and a force for enhancement. AONTAS, AHEAD and USI, for example, represent the views of groups of learners, collaborate with other stakeholders and are represented on key committees and boards. Many other students and student representatives provide valuable contributions at local provider level and were seen to be an invaluable means of communication with the wider student population.

---

1 Over 70% of higher education students responding to the USI survey cited in the report agreed or strongly agreed that they were "able to access the online learning sufficiently to complete [their] studies e.g. access to required equipment". A majority of students responding to the USI survey found the online content delivered by HEIs during the COVID-19 crisis to be of good quality (28% of students responding to the USI survey disagreed and 19% were neutral).

It is noteworthy that when higher education students were asked (USI survey) about the main support they relied on, 74% of them picked peer support (other students) as one of the main supports. This was by far the top support.

Learning outcomes were critical

The principle of the conservation of essential learning outcomes helped focus minds on what needed to be done rather than what could no longer be done. The time invested by the institutions in the elaboration of intended programme and module learning outcomes over the past 20 years stood them in good stead during this emergency.

Learning outcomes concepts were central in the development of the QQI principles to guide alternative assessment arrangements that were developed and agreed with the representative bodies IUA, THEA, ETBI, and HECA and directly with RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences and TU Dublin.

The usefulness of learning outcomes was no surprise to us. We have long promoted their use, for example through the National Framework of Qualifications, and we recently published a Green Paper on the Qualifications System that explores a wide and intricate range of issues related to the support of qualifications standards.

Quality assurance processes supported change management

The quality assurance infrastructure established by institutions proved crucial in the approaches to change management which inspires confidence in the reasonableness of those changes.

Internationally, quality assurance agencies were key actors in national efforts to support governments and higher education institutions in the emergency response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Continental European and global networks of quality assurance agencies, higher education institution representative bodies and student representative bodies also contributed to supporting their members by publishing guidance, conducting surveys, organising webinars and collecting and sharing examples of good practice.

QQI contributed to such webinars and also provided examples to peer quality assurance agencies and networks of its experience of virtual site visits for institutional and programme evaluation as well as using the opportunity to disseminate internationally the guidance it had provided to institutions on quality assurance and assessment during the pandemic.

QQI also stayed in touch with peer quality assurance agencies abroad to monitor and communicate any significant developments worldwide.

Information and Communications Technology

Information technology infrastructure was critically important in enabling rapid change. Without it, this academic year could not have been completed and virtually everything would have ground to a halt. However, resource problems e.g. access to reliable broadband or suitable devices, made remote access a challenge for some.

Future Possibilities of Technology-Enhanced TLA

The emergency transition to remote teaching, learning and assessment was not a conclusive test of what can be achieved by online approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. Nevertheless, it may have opened eyes to new possibilities and challenged the necessity of some ingrained practices that may have been considered sacrosanct until COVID-19 struck.

While we cannot judge the potential contribution of TEL to Irish tertiary education on the basis of experiences in the unplanned emergency transition to remote teaching, learning and assessment, we can learn something from the experience.

Remote teaching, learning and assessment challenges different discipline-areas and learner groups differently. Therefore, we suspect that discipline-area communities of practice need to grow, to connect with, and contribute to the scholarship of online teaching, learning and assessment in their discipline-areas.

We expect to see an ever-increasing use of technology to provide flexibility for learners and to enhance teaching, learning and assessment. Blended learning involves courses using a blend of online and face-to-face processes offering learners the best of both worlds. Blended learning is an exciting area for future development that can bring substantial benefits to society. It will need investment and it will need open-mindedness about teaching, learning and assessment practices.

Assessment and academic integrity

With many institutions replacing invigilated unseen in-person written examinations with online exams that were frequently non-proctored there were greater opportunities for cheating in the second semester of the 2019/2020 academic year than normal.

While the opportunities for cheating may have increased, all higher education institutions have experience in preventing, deterring and detecting breaches of academic integrity especially plagiarism and dealing with suspected cases of academic misconduct. Institutions have regulations on academic integrity and drew much attention to these during the recent assessments.

Also it is fortunate that there has been an increased focus nationally on academic integrity in higher education during the past year or so with legislation[2] in 2019 that creates new offences and the launch of the QQI-sponsored and provider-led *National Academic Integrity Network*. There has also been a special emphasis on combatting contract cheating (e.g. buying or selling an essay or dissertation online).

International students, researchers and faculty enhance the higher education experience for all

Any reduction in the proportion of international students studying in Ireland as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, aside from being financially damaging to institutions, has the potential to diminish the educational experience for students in Ireland because of the reduced opportunity to engage with people from different backgrounds. Any reduction in the involvement of international researchers or faculty also has the potential to affect the educational experience.

---

2 Section 15 of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019 makes it an offence to provide or advertise cheating services.

A similar point applies to any reduction of students from Ireland engaging in periods of study abroad under Erasmus+ and similar schemes.

International students have increased in recent years. There has been a *"45% jump in the number of non-EEA students in Ireland compared to five years ago. ..... This set a record for international student enrolment in the country. Nearly 18,500 non-EEA students were enrolled in post-secondary studies in Ireland during the 2018/19 academic year...... There were also 5,000 full-time students from within the EU that same year."*[3] In general terms Ireland received positive recognition from international peers on its holistic treatment of international students during the COVID-19 crisis.

Collaboration

Collaboration was a clear theme underpinning the approach to the crisis in the FET and HE communities.

We were also impressed by the support and system-wide collaboration we received from the outset of this global pandemic with other state agencies, representative bodies and other organisations involved with the tertiary education system.

Collaboration with QQI on this report

Institutions were somewhat nervous about making responses and what they might find given the rapid transition to remote teaching, learning and assessment. When approached by QQI to undertake this brief reflective project, providers, their staff, management, and students were already under considerable pressure to manage the many complicated elements in this rapid change context. They did not want to be judged harshly on emergency provisions and decisions they all had to make from their own homes. They are now focussed on making next year a success for all staff and students and they continue to need support from all. We were especially impressed by the openness and depth of some of the responses.

PSRBs

Not all professional body placement issues were resolved satisfactorily and providers, their representative bodies, THEA and IUA, and professional bodies continue to work together with the support of QQI to resolve outstanding issues involving a small number of HE programmes and their enrolled students, some of whom are due to graduate this year. The majority of professional bodies were in a position to allow the institutions to judge how best to ensure students achieved the expected learning outcomes.

Final thoughts

Social distancing will continue to constrain tertiary education teaching, learning and assessment modalities in 20/21. People are learning to adapt to COVID-19 but it is highly contagious, and its exponential growth potential is ruthless. On-campus capacity will be reduced while COVID-19 remains a threat and some kinds of work placements may also be more difficult to secure. The risk of reescalation of social distancing restrictions remains.

---

3 Independent News for international students, July 2020. (https://www.studyinternational.com/news/study-in-ireland-covid19/)

Choosing how to use onsite activity to best effect will be critical. The induction of new students and returning progressing students will need to be a priority as will access to specialist facilities and equipment.

Enhancing online teaching, learning and assessment will be an ongoing priority for institutions as will the need for online delivery of academic and professional support, care and guidance services to students and staff. The institutional effort and resources required to establish a planned blended format for all 20/21 programmes are significant.

The short time frame of this study means that we do not know how sustainable some of the emergency measures are and whether fatigue will increase if these measures are implemented over a longer time span.

We hope the detailed information in this report, which was generated from responses of a wide range of organisations based on multiple student and staff surveys, will provide some inspiring practical guidance for enhancement in 20/21 and beyond.

ANNEXE

1 Acknowledgements

1.1 List of contributors

Title of contributing Institution/ Organisation	Date of most recent response to our call[1]
AHEAD	10/06/2020
American College Dublin	02/07/2020
Aontas	17/07/2020
Carlow College	26/06/2020
Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB)	22/06/2020
Children's Therapy Centre Limited (CTC)	11/06/2020
City of Dublin Education and Training Board (CDETB)	19/06/2020
Clanwilliam Institute	17/07/2020
College of Computing Technology (CCT College)	22/06/2020
Cork Institute of Technology (CIT)	28/07/2020
Department of Education and Skills (DES)	06/05/2020
Donegal Education and Training Board (Donegal ETB)	24/06/2020
Dorset College	30/06/2020
Dublin Business School (DBS)	02/07/2020
Dublin City University (DCU)	20/07/2020[2]
Dundalk Institute of Technology (DKIT)	30/06/2020
Gaelchultúr	22/06/2020
Galway Mayo Institute of Technology (GMIT)	30/06/2020
Galway Roscommon Education and Training Board (GRETB)	02/07/2020
Griffith College	07/07/2020
HEAnet	07/07/2020
Hibernia College	24/06/2020
Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT)	26/06/2020
Institute of Integrative Counselling and Psychotherapy (IICP)	22/06/2020
Institute of Technology Carlow (IT Carlow)	20/07/2020
Institute of Technology Sligo (IT Sligo)	21/07/2020
Institute of Technology Tralee (IT Tralee)	06/07/2020
International College Dublin Business School (ICD Business School)	23/06/2020

1 Some institutions provided several different responses over a period.

2 The first response was received on 20/7/2020. A supplementary report was received on 5 August but was too late to include in the analysis.

International College for Personal and Professional Development (ICPPD)	02/07/2020
Irish College of Humanities and Applied Sciences (ICHAS)	26/06/2020
Irish Payroll Association (IPASS)	02/07/2020
Irish Universities Association (IUA)	07/07/2020
Kerry Education and Training Board (KETB)	26/06/2020
Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board (KWETB)	22/06/2020
Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board (KCETB)	25/06/2020
Laois and Offaly Education and Training Board (LOETB)	25/06/2020
Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT)	10/07/2020
Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board (LCETB)	25/06/2020
Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT)	03/07/2020
Louth Meath Education and Training Board (LMETB)	22/06/2020
Maynooth University (MU)	15/07/2020
Mayo, Sligo and Leitrim Education and Training Board (MSLETB)	26/06/2020
National College of Ireland (NCI)	30/06/2020
National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP)	29/06/2020
National University of Ireland Galway (NUI Galway)	16/07/2020
Open Training College	26/06/2020
Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland University of Medicine and Health Sciences	17/06/2020
St Nicholas Montessori Society Of Ireland (SMSI)	10/07/2020
Technological Higher Education Association (THEA)	07/07/2020
Technological University Dublin (TU Dublin)	10/07/2020
Trinity College Dublin (TCD)	24/07/2020
Union of Students in Ireland (USI)	18/06/2020
University College Cork (UCC)	16/07/2020
University College Dublin (UCD)	14/07/2020
University of Limerick (UL)	09/07/2020
Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board (WWETB)	25/06/2020

1.2 QQI met with the following umbrella organisations, government departments, representative bodies, and others

- AHEAD
- Aontas
- Council of Registrars for the Institutes of Technology
- Department of Education and Skills (DES)
- Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI)
- Further Education Support Service (FESS)
- HEAnet

- Higher Education Authority (HEA)
- Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA)
- Irish Universities Association (IUA)
- National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD)
- National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (NFETL)
- National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP)
- Seán O'Connor, a research degree student at Institute of Technology Sligo
- Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI)
- Technological Higher Education Association (THEA)
- Union of Students in Ireland (USI)

In addition to the above, QQI held meetings with colleagues in the universities, Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland University of Medicine and Health Sciences, TU Dublin, private independent providers, Further Education and Training (FET) Directors from Education and Training Boards (ETBs) and other FE and HE providers.

2 List of abbreviations

AHEAD	Association for Higher Education Access and Disability
CAO	Central Applications Office for access to higher education in Ireland
CORU	Health & Social Care Professionals Regulator in Ireland
CPD	Continuing professional development
DAB	Designated awarding bodies (including e.g. universities[3], institutes of technology[4] and technological universities)
DES	Department of Education and Skills (Irish Government Dept.)
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
EQAVET	European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ETB	Education and training board
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
FET	Further education and training
FQ-EHEA	More often this is abbreviated QF-EHEA. Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area (overarching framework)
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher education institution
HE	Higher education

---

3 Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland is a university.

4 From 1 January 2020.

ILO	Intended learning outcome
IOT	Institute of technology
IUA	Irish Universities Association
LC	Leaving Certificate
LO	Learning outcome
NFETL	National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
PSRB	Professional, statutory or regulatory body
PRSB	Permutation of PSRB
PRB	Professional recognition body (in this context the same as PSRB)
QA	Quality assurance
QAA	The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (UK QA agency)
QIR	Quality, Integrity and Reputation Group established on an ad hoc basis by the Department of Education and Skills (Irish Government Dept.) during the COVID-19 crisis.
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SOLAS	State organisation with responsibility for funding, planning and co-ordinating FET in Ireland
THEA	Technological Higher Education Association
The 2012 Act	Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012
The 2019 Act	Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019
TLA	Teaching, Learning and Assessment
TEL	Technology enhanced learning
USI	The Union of Students in Ireland
VLE	Virtual learning environment

3 Glossary

Assessment

Learner assessment (specifically assessment of learning) means inference (e.g. judgement or estimation or evaluation) of a learner's knowledge, skill or competence by comparison with a standard based on appropriate evidence. Self-assessment is included in this. Assessment has many purposes (including summative and formative). It is intrinsic to both teaching and learning both to provide feedback and as a learning opportunity. For the purpose of this report when we refer to assessment we normally mean summative assessment to determine eligibility to graduate, earn academic credit or progress to the next stage of a 'programme' of education and training (e.g. an honours bachelor degree course).

Blended learning

This is an approach to education involving a mixture of remote (online) and in person interactions. Some teaching, learning and assessment activities occur in virtual environments, others in on-site environments. It is sometimes referred to as hybrid learning.

External examiner or authenticator

External examining is a quality assurance mechanism employed by providers that supports public confidence in academic qualifications. The external examining process offers an objective interface: a principal outcome of external examining is the introduction of an independent element into the procedures for the assessment of learners. An external examiner is an independent expert who is a member of the broader community of practice within the programme's field of learning and whose accomplishments attest to his/her likelihood of having the authority necessary to fulfil the responsibilities of the role. The External Authenticator in FET fulfils a similar role. In research degree programmes, the term 'external examiner' is used to refer to an 'external assessor'. The functions of the research degree external examiner are different from those of the external examiner for other types of programmes

Hybrid learning

See blended learning.

Learner

We use the term learner to represent a person enrolled or aspiring to enrol in a process by which that person may acquire knowledge, skill or competence. That process may be, for example, a programme of education and training, a course of study, a course of instruction, an apprenticeship, a traineeship, a research degree programme. We normally use the more traditional term 'student' to mean a learner in the context of higher education.

Learning

Learning is a process that, while centred in learners (e.g. students, apprentices, interns, trainees, pupils, and such like), depends on the learning environment and their interaction with it. The learning environment has physical, social, and cultural dimensions. It includes the people (e.g. teachers, tutors, supervisors, other learners, patients, clients, service users, co-workers, family, friends and such like) that the learner connects or interacts with while learning. It includes the physical spaces, contexts, materials, and instruments (e.g. laboratories, studios) that the learner engages with. The learning environment is co-created by everyone involved.

Programme	A programme of education and training is a process by which a learner acquires knowledge, skill or competence and includes a course of study, a course of instruction and an apprenticeship. In the publicly funded FET sector a FET programme can also mean a funding programme—such as the PLC programme, the BTEI programme and such like. We do not use the term programme in this sense. Also, FET is expected to move increasingly away from approaches based on multiple different funding programmes over the next few years.
Teacher	Teacher means anybody who practices teaching (and assessment) as defined in this table. It includes trainer, tutor, lecturer, mentor and research supervisor.
Teaching	Teaching includes educating, supervising, instructing, training, guiding, demonstrating, mentoring and such like. It involves guiding learning and providing opportunities for learners to acquire and demonstrate knowledge, skill, and competence. It occurs within a learning environment and depends on interactions between teachers, learners, and other people within it. The teacher and learner come together in the learning environment. The teacher has a role in shaping that environment and setting the learning agenda. In many settings teachers adapt to the learners they are dealing with using spoken and unspoken cues. The purpose of a specific teaching process (e.g. course) can be expressed in terms of enabling learners to achieve intended learning outcomes. Self-teaching means that the teacher and learner are the same person.

4 Composition and Terms of Reference (TOR) for the Quality, Integrity and Reputation Working Group

Quality, Integrity and Reputation Working Group	
Chair	QQI (Dr. Padraig Walsh)
Secretary	QQI
Core Members	QQI, DES, IUA, THEA, TU Dublin, AONTAS, USI, ETBI, HECA, SOLAS, HEA, NFETL Additional members may be required.
TOR	To ensure the maintenance of the quality of teaching and learning, assessment and qualifications To develop agreed statements To capture learning from providers experience for future system enhancement To document best practice and develop guidelines To establish communication principles and guidelines (students; employers, professional bodies....) **Proposed initial agenda –*this agenda is rolling and will adapt frequently*** - Online assessment - Credit for partial completion - Professional body requirements
Regularity	Initially weekly
Ways of working	Identification and allocation of leadership for work streams Identification of common arrangements and shared commitments Escalate to SGInteract with stakeholders and third parties Communications out to the system Monitoring international developments and best practice Longer term impact analysis
Linking to	Feed into IOG Also linking to MTCP and Mitigating Educational Disadvantage