

Your Education, Your Voice, Your Vision

*Results of the Student Campaign run by
the Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning
(EDTL) project, April – May 2021*



**Enhancing
Digital Teaching
and Learning**

Irish Universities Association

Purpose of the Campaign

The Your Education, Your Voice, Your Vision campaign by the IUA Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning in Irish Universities project, aimed to crowd-source the vision for university learning in a post-Covid environment; challenging third-level students across Ireland to project themselves into the post-pandemic future and imagine their ideal learning experience. Our goal is to use students' remote learning and assessment experiences to help create a better and brighter future for third-level education in Ireland. We want to imagine a future that caters for every student in Ireland, where no one is left behind.

The campaign asked students to project themselves into an ideal world, in the future, and imagine what learning in higher education looks like. The results complement the interim report of the Irish Survey of Student Engagement¹, which asked questions addressing the impact of COVID-19 on students' experience of higher education.

Approach

Your Education, Your Vision, Your Voice campaign was undertaken from the 17th April to 10th May 2021. The target media buy was aimed at 17-to-24-year-olds. The survey was coordinated and managed by the Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning (EDTL) project and supported by the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP), the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (NFETL).

The campaign was composed of two separate online survey tools: simple polls were scheduled to appear on social media platforms including Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and Facebook; and the full survey with two open ended questions appeared on Facebook and the EDTL project website².

A key strength of the survey was the breadth and reach in terms of the diversity of students that could be targeted nationally, and the anonymity afforded by social media platforms. Polls can capture the pulse of a target audience however they are limited in terms of the either-or nature of the options that can be presented, and the lack of participant demographic information (institution, discipline of study, level of study).

The poll results have been discussed and interpreted by the EDTL student intern team as part of an open webinar discussion³, with impressions documented in the June 2021 EDTL Newsletter⁴.

¹ StudentSurvey.ie (2021). Irish Survey of Student Engagement, Interim Results Bulletin 2021

² EDTL (2020). Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning website, edtl.blog

³ EDTL (2021a). Your Education, Your Voice, Your Vision – What Our Students Said. #IUADigEd Webinar, 31 May 2021

⁴ EDTL (2021b). Student Interns: What the Student Voice Results Tell Us. EDTL Newsletter, June 2021

The open ended question responses have been analysed by EDTL team members based in University College Dublin, using a manual process of hand-coding responses to draw out key themes.

Campaign Metrics

Six poll questions were targeted at students of 17-to-24-year-olds from 17th April to 10th May 2021, on social media platforms Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and Facebook

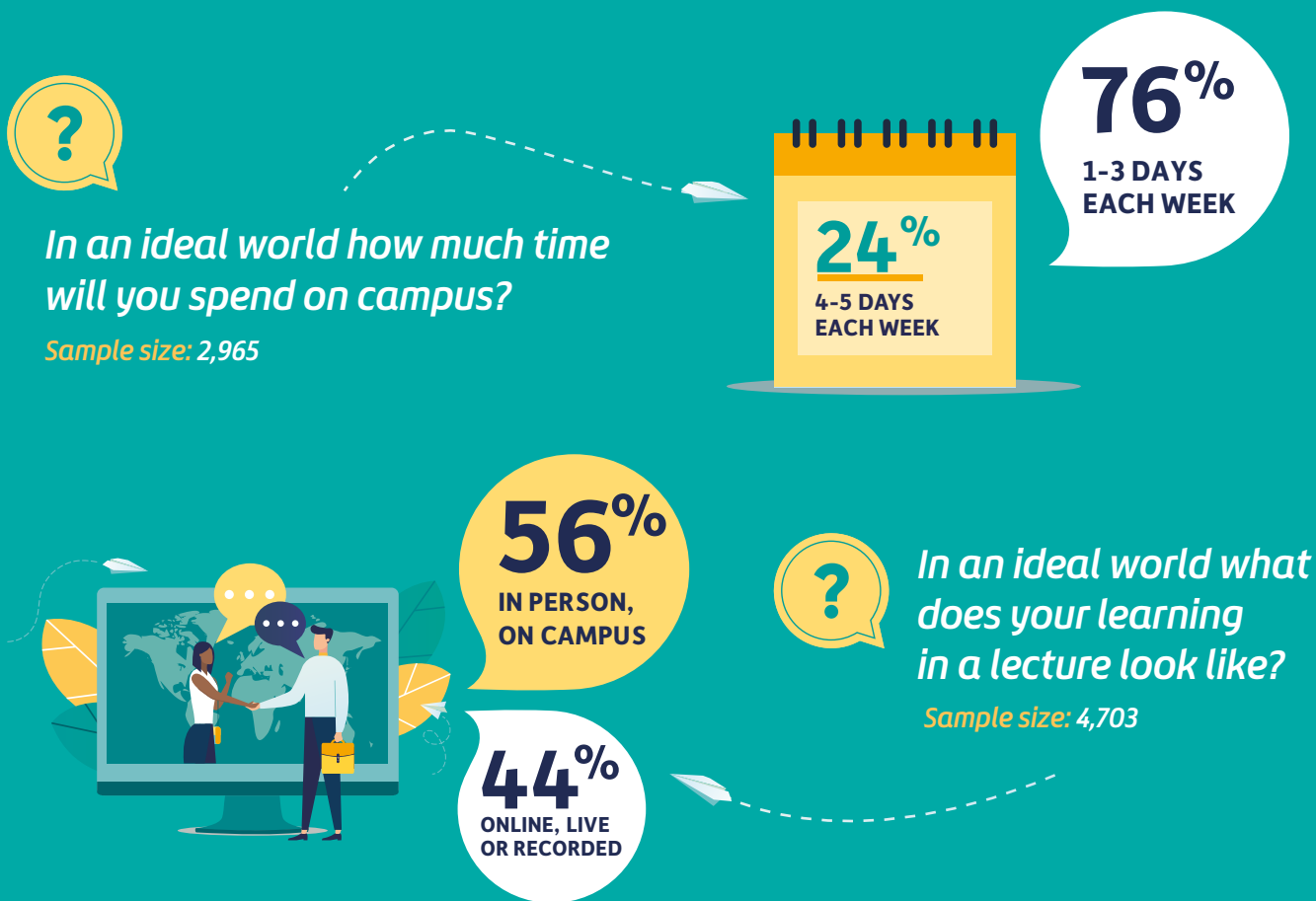
Each poll question had an associated 3-second video, created with the EDTL student interns, showing students in typical learning situations.

Reach	Number of people who saw at least one poll	620k individuals
Impressions	Number of times a poll appeared in someone's timeline	2.08m
Engagements	Likes, comments, shares and clicks	599
Reponses	Total number of responses to a poll question	14k
Video views	Number of times a 3 sec video was viewed	77k



Interpreting the Poll Results

We asked students about being on campus in an ideal world, and where their learning (in a lecture) would happen.



While students definitely want to be back on campus, they don't want to be there full time. They value an on-campus experience, for a variety of reasons, including interacting socially with classmate, making friends, access to facilities, and the chance to speak with staff face-to-face, as can be seen from responses to the open text questions.

Students face various barriers to higher education, for example, parents with young families or caring responsibilities, students with full-time jobs or students with disabilities. There are also financial and time barriers, high rents or long commutes.

More than 2000 students (44% of respondents) indicated that they would like to continue to learn from online lectures, whether they are live or recorded sessions.

Comment

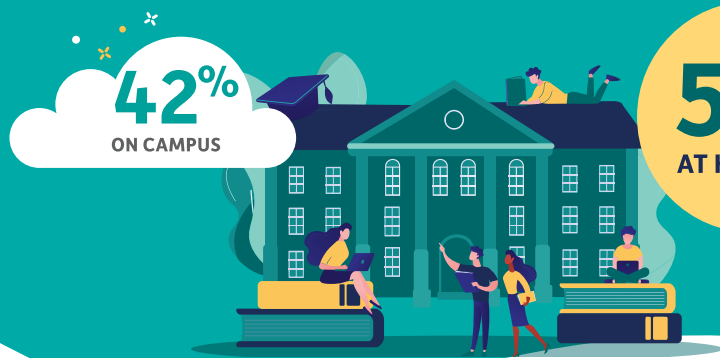
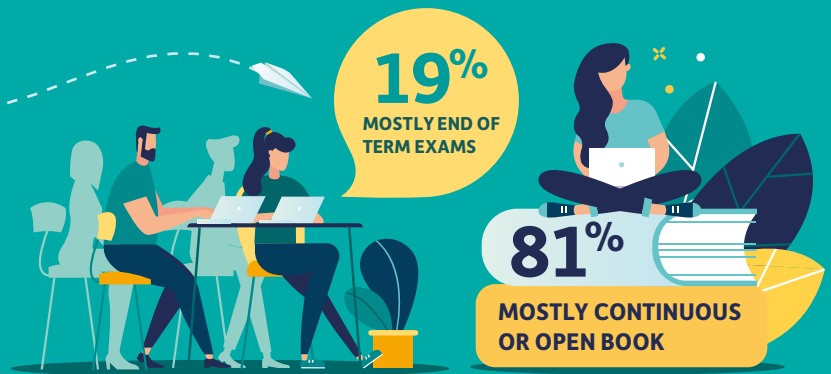
Learning from lectures in an online environment does not preclude an on-campus experience, students can be on campus but joining or viewing a lecture online. The responses demonstrate a demand for increased blended learning opportunities to support a more diverse range of students.

We asked students about their preferred type of assessment and where they would study, in an ideal world.



In an ideal world what does your assessment look like?

Sample size: 3,594



In an ideal world where will you study for assessments?

Sample size: 4,192

The traditional end-of-semester exam taking place in an exam hall is not popular and clearly not desired by a vast majority of the student population.

Comment

Many students don't perform well under pressure and formal examinations do not provide the opportunity to really demonstrate their learning and work from the year. Continuous assessment may more accurately reflect their learning and is often more reflective of how they will apply their skills in a future career.

The result of the poll on assessment are decisive and highlight that a re-imagining of the university examination system is desired by the student population.

The question on where they will study, at home or on campus, is more evenly split, and reflects varied student preferences, commuting distances, and availability of suitable spaces at home. Studying on campus may be the only way to study at a desk or in a quiet room, with access to WIFI.

Comment

Higher education institutions should consider how to facilitate the various ways that students prefer to study. Access to e-journals and online study materials is needed to support flexibility. A range of on-campus spaces should be considered to facilitate quiet study, joining online classes, group work for continuous assessment, and informal spaces to support peer learning.

We asked students about their interactions with staff and fellow students in an ideal world.



In an ideal world how do you interact and engage with other students?

Sample size: 2,360

15%
ONLINE



85%
FACE TO FACE

82%
FACE TO FACE



18%
ONLINE



In an ideal world how do you interact and engage with staff?

Sample size: 2,594

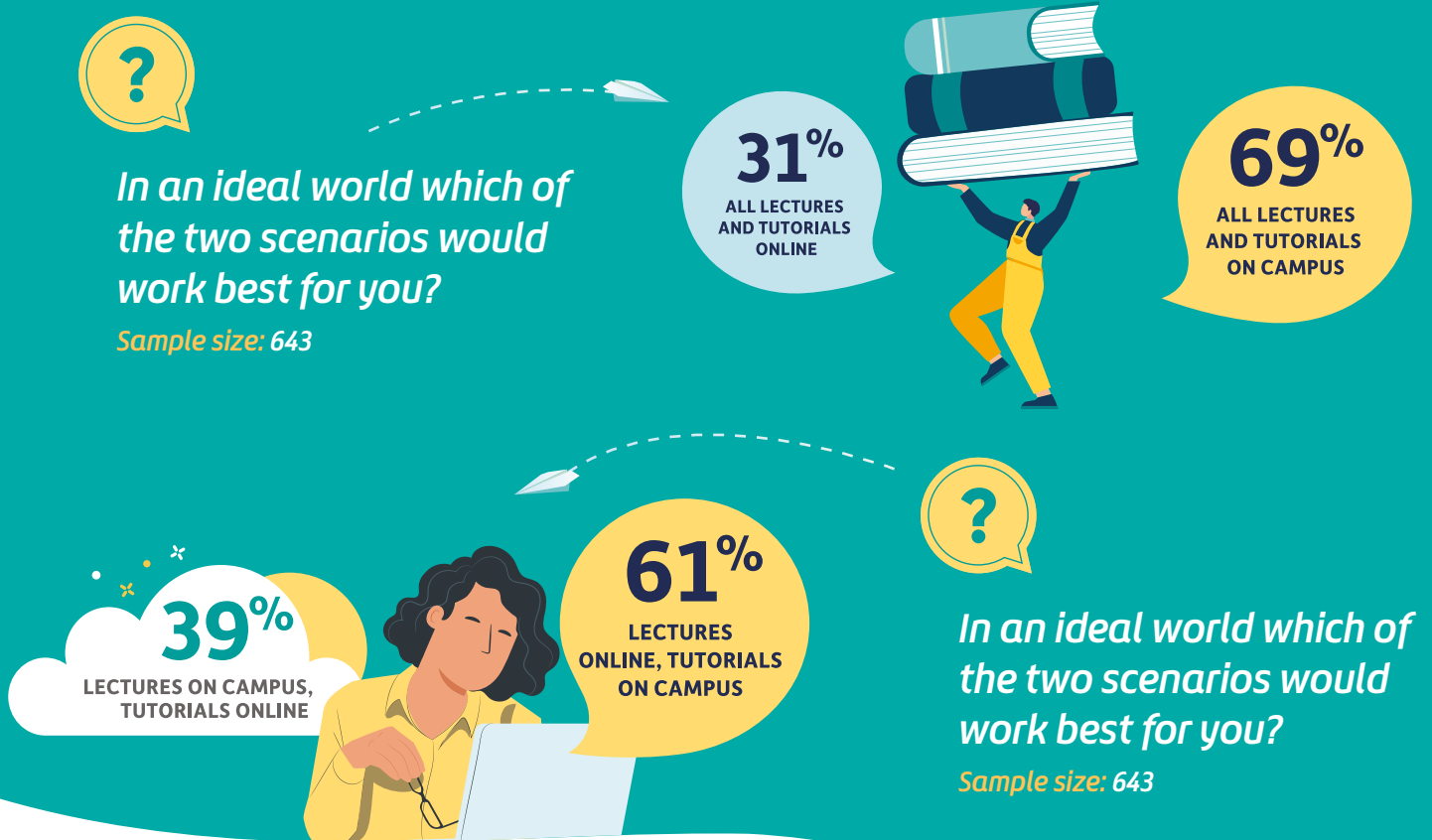
The results of these two polls overwhelmingly highlight that students want in-person engagement.

Comment

We know that teaching and learning is built on strong relationships, which can naturally and easily develop when meeting in person. On the other hand, online environments come with significant advantages for busy staff and students, providing increased flexibility and productivity opportunities. Many students enjoy the possibility of attending a lecturer's virtual office hours, avoiding the need to travel to or across campus for meetings.

The results show that students generally do not want face-to-face interactions to be replaced with online interactions, and many students want to keep utilising features provided by virtual platforms.

Two additional poll questions were included as part of the full survey on Facebook and the EDTL website, asking students about their preferences for online and on campus teaching scenarios, in an ideal world.



The question pitching online against on campus demonstrates a strong preference for on campus teaching sessions, but a significant percentage (31%) would prefer everything online.

A majority (61% of respondents) support having tutorials in person and lectures online. Tutorials often involve a high degree of discussion or debate, and students may find it more comprehensive and engaging in person.

Comment

Taking the results of the two questions together, and in the context of students not wanting to be on campus full-time, it is clear that students want flexibility and options in how they learn. The poll results for interacting with staff and students show a clear preference for face-to-face interactions.

Taken in combination, these poll results emphasise the importance of campus for interpersonal interaction, but perhaps an opportunity to move less interactive teaching online. A blended learning model allows for flexibility and personal responsibility for students in their learning, while also providing opportunities for students to engage and interact in person with classmates and staff.

Open Responses

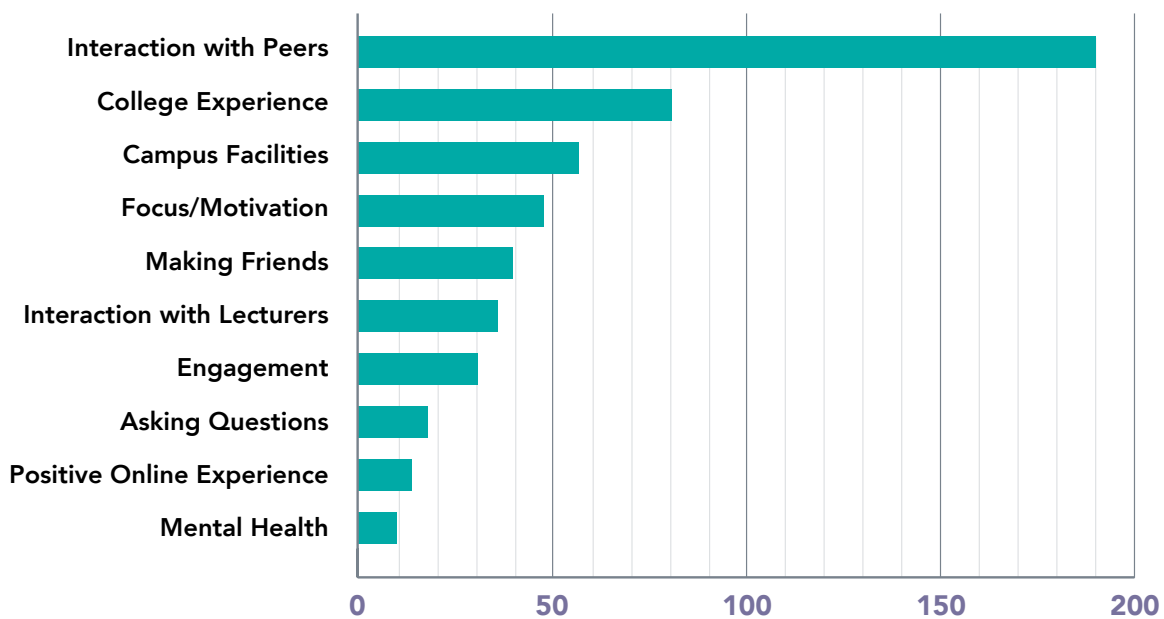
Two open questions were included in the full survey, which appeared in Facebook and on the EDTL project website. The responses have been analysed using a manual process of hand-coding to draw out key themes.

Tell us what you value about being on campus, as a student

Of the 643 students who completed the survey, 470 responded to this question. Not surprisingly, engagement and interaction with peers and staff featured strongly. A first hand-coding identified 23 categories, where some responses could be associated with more than one category. Of these, 304 (65%) mentioned engagement of some form.

A second coding split out engagement with peers, lecturers and general engagement with the campus or were not specified. Other smaller categories were consolidated.

What students value about being on campus



The dominating category of responses relates to engagement and interaction with peers, whether for social purposes (72 responses) or peer learning. Collaboration, discussion, group work, asking questions and problem solving were also mentioned.



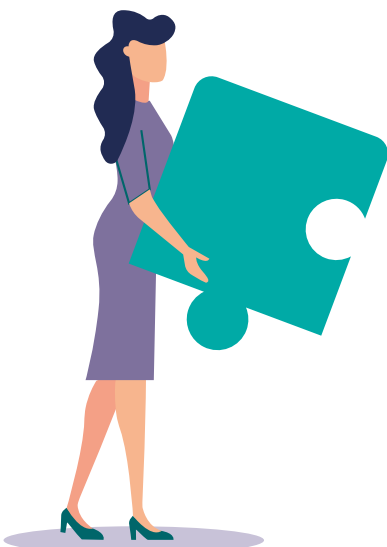
'The opportunity to interact with others, chat to other students, discuss issues and shared learning. Understand if you alone are struggling or are others too.'

Making friends and getting to know people on the same course is much easier when on campus, and this is particularly valued by a significant number of respondents. Three students indicated that they had not had a chance to talk to people in the last year. Informal conversations and serendipitous moments are much more likely to happen in an in-person environment.

'The passing chances to learn about opportunities to get involved in random events, projects or research. The chance to meet someone for a coffee and find your best friend. The chance to get over that writing block when you're in the library. The chance to engage in clubs and societies and find your voice'



Interaction and engagement with lecturers (as opposed to other staff) was also indicated as being valuable in a face-to-face environment. Students mentioned that in-person communication is easier, building better relationships, and they could more easily ask for help.



'Reaching out for help. The ability to form bonds with staff and ask questions/ for help easily.'

Being able to ask staff private questions during office hours was highlighted as a subcategory of staff engagement.

'It is easier to interact with lecturers and ask questions or to talk in person for office hours'



The more general category of Engagement is used for engagement with the course of study or with the learning environment, or where no further explanation is given.

'Engaging with work face to face, easy access to the library, better learning environment'



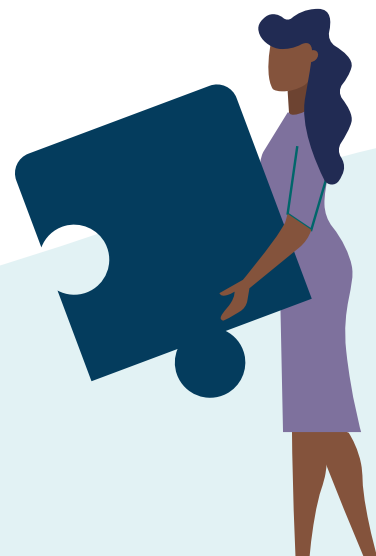
The whole college or campus experience was identified as being valued by a significant group of respondents (17%). Campus atmosphere and extra-curricular activities were mentioned, often in the context of peer engagement and making friends.



'The experience, college isn't just an education, it's making lifelong friends and growing with your classmates'

Use of the library and other campus facilities came through strongly in the responses about what students value about being on campus. A small number mentioned access to academic resources, and 3 people mentioned access to the gym.

'Having a place that I associate with college work, that's separate from my home life. Somewhere I can get in the zone to learn and study. A place where I have everything I need to help me succeed in one place - library, shops, lecture halls, student supports, doctors etc.'



Many students find learning on campus much easier, as indicated by the answers to the poll questions about online/on-campus teaching scenarios. In this category, respondents mentioned that physical presence on campus helps them to focus, supports more effective learning, aids concentration and offers fewer distractions. 48 responses (10%) specifically mentioned benefits to their learning provided by on-campus teaching.



'Being on campus is more engaging than online lectures. It's easier to focus/motivation and the social aspect makes the stress much easier'

Mental health and well-being were mentioned in a small number of the responses (2%). Lack of social activity and campus experience contributed to mental health issues, there was stress and anxiety associated with learning from home, and students also mentioned loneliness.

'I also believe that on campus promotes better Mental health/anxiety as without it many students are exposed to isolation resulting increased anxiety and depression.'



Finally, despite being asked about the value of being on campus, some respondents elected to identify the benefits of the online experience, demonstrating the preference for some students to be wholly or mostly online. Reasons identified include allowing for employment or family commitments, saving time or saving money.

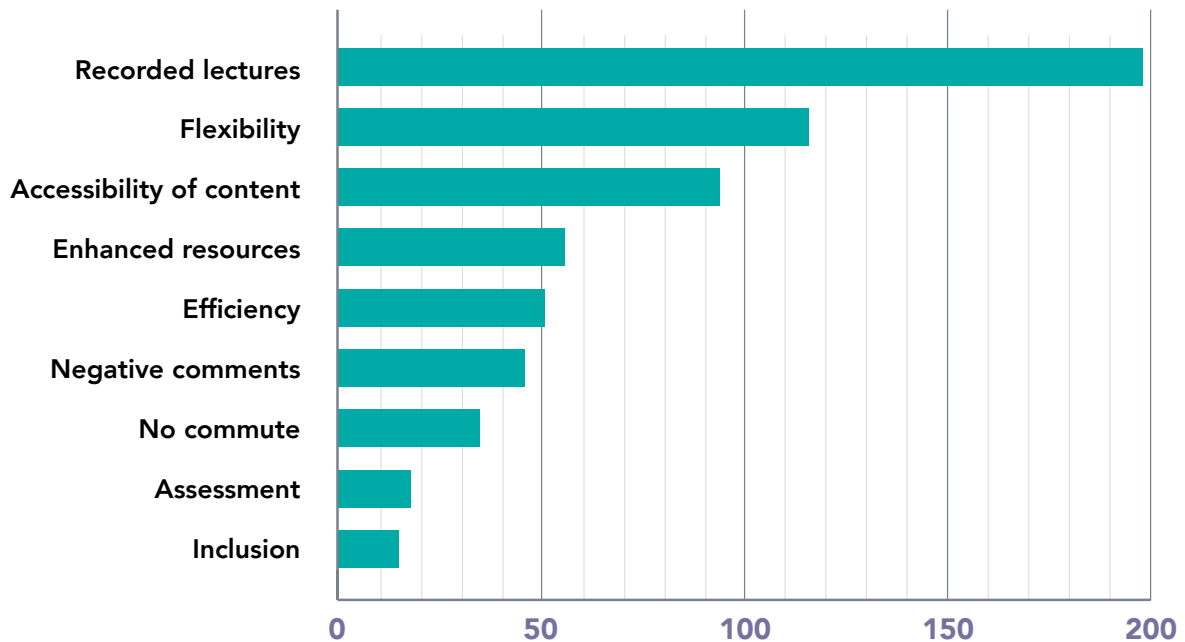


'With long commuting hours I feel that online works best for me. I got much more work done and I could study much more in depth due to the time saved'

Tell us what you value about using technology to support your learning

Of the 643 students who completed the survey, 470 responded to this question. A hand-coding identified 9 categories, where some responses could be associated with more than one. In common with the results of the StudentSurvey.ie Interim Results Bulletin, recorded lectures is the answer that dominates.

What students value about using technology to support learning

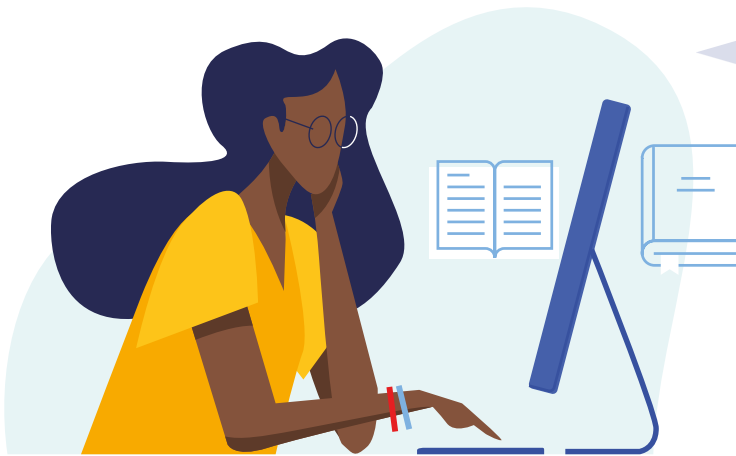


Recorded lectures can be pre-recorded by a lecturer and made available according to a determined schedule through the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). These are often shorter in length than a standard lecture and can focus on smaller chunks of content. Alternatively, live teaching sessions can be recorded and made available after the lecture. Recordings of live sessions are often an hour in length, or multiples of an hour. In the responses, a significant number of students referred to the ability to re-watch lectures (73 responses), to catch up on lectures (7 responses) or to help with revision for assessment (20 responses). Flexibility in how or when to watch recordings was mentioned by 50 students. Respondents also referred to enhancing understanding, and a small number (6 responses) mentioned inclusion in relation to online lectures.

'The ability to rewatch lectures that you either missed or need a recap of is something I really like about being online. It eased the pressure off note taking in the actual lecture and you could focus on the information first.'



Using the VLE to access course content, at a time that suits them, is highly valued by many students. In this category of Accessibility of Content, 32 students cited ease of access and 27 mentioned using online materials in order to revise for assessment.



'Lectures and notes are available whenever you need it. You can learn at a pace that suits you'

General information, Library resources and other materials, often for research purposes, was both easier to access and in some cases enhanced.

'Technology is my primary research resource (including campus Online library resources) as it's so accessible and has a wider range of resources.'



Many students value the convenience and flexibility of online learning as well as the affordances of self-paced learning.



'We can watch the recorded sessions at our own time, we have more freedom'

In their responses to what is valued about using technology to support learning, students referred to convenience (15 responses), financial reasons (17 responses), time-management (16 responses) and less stress.

'Less time commuting, money saved, more flexible learning'

Less stress was also mentioned in connection to assessment. Students value online submission of assignments, continuous assessment, home exams and open book exams.



'Online assessments are much more relevant and interesting than in person exams.'

Overcoming physical and socio-economic barriers to on-campus learning, and using technological tools for inclusivity were all cited for valuing technology to support learning. The affordances of online learning make higher education more accessible for some students.

'Having chronic illnesses, I'm able to attend far more classes and tutorials than I normally would'.

And finally, some students see no or very little value in using technology to support learning. For some students, online learning is more difficult or less accessible due to poor Wi-Fi or other technical issues. Some students just prefer the in-person experience.



'I value using technology to source and complete assignments only. On campus interaction is needed in order to support learning in a more meaningful way. between getting physical help from lecturers and peers.'

Summary

Third level students across Ireland envision a campus-based learning experience in their future. The majority of students want to be on campus for a variety of reasons, including engagements and interactions with staff and other students, as well as the campus facilities offered. But a majority of students don't want to be on campus full time. Students cited parental and caring responsibilities, financial issues, long commutes and high rents as reasons why they value the use of technology to support their learning.

The results of the campaign highlight that there is not one ideal learning environment that suits all students. A significant number of students expect their learning to happen online, through live online classes, recorded lectures, and other resources available through the VLE. Informal conversations and serendipitous moments are more likely to happen in-person.

Flexibility is key. The poll and survey responses demonstrate a demand for increased hybrid or blended learning opportunities, making optimum use of technologies for teaching and learning, to support a more diverse range of students.

Learning in an online environment does not preclude being on-campus. Higher education institutions must consider how to support the various ways that students prefer to study. A range of on-campus spaces should be considered to facilitate quiet study, joining online classes, group work and informal peer learning.

For students, the vision of assessment in higher education in an ideal world is continuous or open book. The traditional end-of-semester exam taking place in an exam hall is seen as stressful, and does not allow a student to perform at their best. Continuous assessment can be more authentic, relevant and interesting, while still challenging students to demonstrate and use what they have learned.

Acknowledgements

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