National Report
on Students and COVID-19
Tuarascáil Náisiúnta ar mhic léinn agus COVID-19

July 2020

USI
Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

Foreword | Réamhrá

COVID-19 caused an extraordinary amount of disruption for all sections of society and the third-level sector was no different in this respect. In a very short space of time, our campuses were closed, our learning spaces rapidly moved online and the typical student experience, as we knew it, was flipped on its head.

The responses to this survey illustrate some of the key challenges that many learners faced during the rapid move to emergency remote teaching. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible to adequately capture the experience of every student across such a diverse learning population, but what we have learned from this survey is that, in spite of the diverse population within third-level education, many students faced common challengess.

This report outlines some of the shared experiences of students over the last few months: of connectivity problems and inadequate study spaces, of lost employment and lost motivation. Many students were helped through the period by those around them including family and friends, their peers and of course their teaching staff, and this narrative came through clearly in the responses received.

However, as we move towards a new academic year, one that will be unlike previous years in many respects, it is crucial that we learn from what has just passed. The teaching and learning landscape of the last few months was the result of an emerging global pandemic that required an immediate and emergency response. The next academic year will not be the same - and so we must ensure that the lessons learnt from Spring 2020 are embedded in the fabric of the 2020/21 academic year.

Many students faced challenges outside of their education throughout this period - including mental health difficulties, loss of employment and bereavement. For those graduating this year, they do so with a high degree of uncertainty about their job prospects. Many of those continuing for the next year will find themselves financially worse off due to reduced summer time and part-time employment opportunities. Those who have been made redundant as a result of the ensuing economic downturn might be contemplating a return to education. In this context, it has never been more important to ensure that adequate supports are available - through increased grants, support for graduates and well-funded support services within our colleges.

COVID-19 has exposed deep inequalities within society, including a digital divide with many learners being left behind due to lack of access to devices and inadequate WiFi connection. The third-level sector has worked to address some of these issues, and these efforts must be complemented by the government through enactment of the National Broadband Plan and funding to enable the purchase of devices for students.

Structure, communication and support are the key things that students have identified as priorities for the forthcoming year - the patience demonstrated by students during the past few months is likely to wear thin if courses are not delivered in a logically planned and structured format in the new academic year and, thus, conversations must continue over the summer months at an institutional level and student voices must be a central part of those conversations.

Finally, as we move through the academic year, there will come a time where we take the opportunity to reflect. To reflect on the change that our educational institutions have undergone over the last number of months and to look forward to the future of education. Although many of the changes that have been made, have happened out of necessity, there are others that we may wish to retain in the long-term. COVID-19 offers us the opportunity to reflect honestly on all aspects of third-level education with a view to making long-term change to the practices we previously considered the norm. Students, student representatives and USI look forward to engaging in these conversations.

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Contents | Clár

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An online version of this document with links to referenced documents is available at https://usi.ie

Context | Comhthéacs

Union of Students in Ireland

The Union of Students in Ireland (Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn) is the national representative body for third-level Students' Unions in Ireland. Founded in 1959, USI now represents more than 374,000 students in over thirty colleges across the island of Ireland. The goal of USI is to work for the rights of students and a fair and equal third-level education system in Ireland.

USI is a full member of the European Students' Union (ESU) which represents students from 46 National Students' Unions in 39 countries and a member of Eurodoc, the European Council for Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers.

USI carried out research amongst students in third-level education from the 2nd June until the 15th June inclusive. The research was conducted via a survey on Survey Monkey which encompassed three main areas: Learning, Teaching and Assessment; Finance and Accommodation and Mental Health and Wellbeing. The survey included a mixture of multiple choice, likert-scale and free text questions.

Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

Tá Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn mar eagraíocht ionadaíoch náisiúnta d'Aontais Mhic Léinn tríú leibhéal in Éirinn. Déanann AMLÉ ionadaíocht ar os cionn 374,000 mac léinn i 30 choláiste trasna oileán na hÉireann. An aidhm atá ag AMLÉ ná obair ar son cearta mac léinne agus córas tríú leibhéal in Éirinn atá cothrom agus comhionann.

Tá AMLÉ mar bhall iomlán ag Aontas na Mac Léinn Eorpach a dhéanann ionadaíocht ar son mac léinn ó 46 Aontas Mac Léinn náisiúnta i 39 tír agus táimid mar bhall de Eurodoc, Comhairle Eorpach d'Iarrthóirí Dochtúireachta agus Taighdeoirí Sóiséaracha .

Rinne AMLÉ taighde i measc mac léinn in oideachas tríú leibhéal ó 2 Meitheamh go dtí 15 Meitheamh an dá lá san áireamh. Rinneadh an taighde trí suirbhé ar Survey Monkey agus bhí trí réimse i gceist leis: Foghlaim, Múineadh agus Measúnú; Airgeadas agus Lóistín, agus Meabhairshláinte agus Folláine. Bhí meascán idir ceisteanna ilrogha, scála likert agus ceisteanna oscailte.

Demographics | Déimeagrafaic
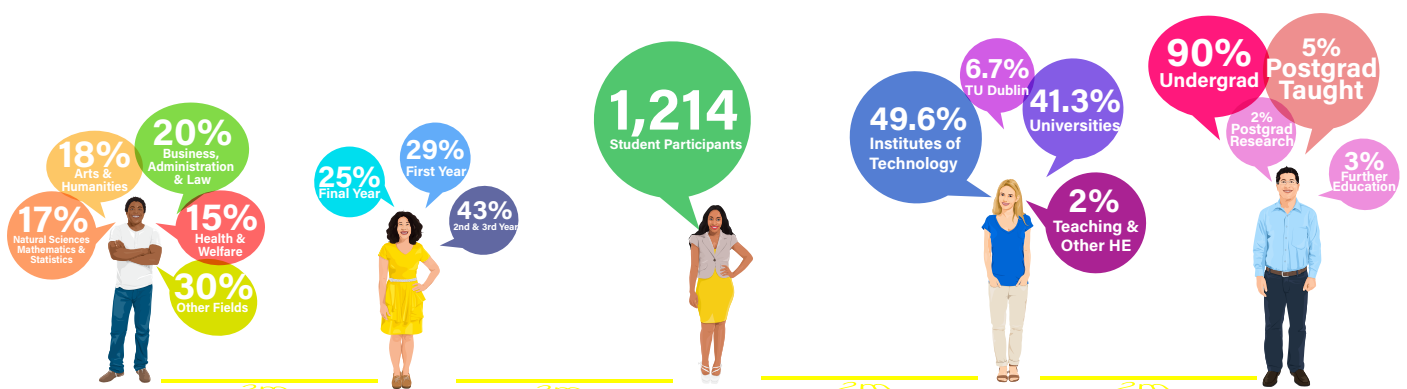
Key Findings | Príomhthorthaí

Learning Teaching & Assessment | Foghlaim Múineadh agus Measúnú

This section was focused on the learning experience throughout the COVID-19 period. The summarized results from this section will be shared with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) as part of their Evaluation of Teaching, Learning and Assessment on behalf of the TES COVID-19 Response groups.

Sa chuid seo díríodh ar an eispéireas foghlama le linn na tréimhse COVD-19. Roinnfear na torthaí achoimrithe ón gcuid seo le Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann mar chuid dá Measúnú ar Mhúineadh, Foghlaim agus Measúnú ar son grúpaí freagartha COVID-19 TES.

Key Findings:

- Over a third (35.84%) of students reported not having opportunities to engage with other classmates.

- Just over half (51.55%) feel the online learning content was of good quality.

- Nearly 65% of students felt that their learning outcomes changed significantly as a result of COVID-19.

- 38.42% of students feel that they performed significantly worse as a result of alternative assessments, with 17.05% feeling that they performed significantly better.

- Nearly 80% of students listed lack of motivation as one of the major barriers they faced. Just under a third reported issues with access to Wi-Fi. 35% of students felt they did not have adequate access to online learning content.

- Peers, Staff, and College Resources were the main sources of support for students throughout the period.

Príomhthorthaí

- Thuairiscigh níos mó ná trian (35.84%) de mhic léinn nach raibh deis acu dul i dteagmháil le mic léinn eile.

- Mothaíonn níos mó na leath (51.55%) go raibh an t-ábhar foghlama ar líne ar ardchaighdeán.

- Mhothaigh beagnach 65% de mhic léinn gur tháinig athrú suntasach ar na spriocanna foghlma mar gheall ar COVID-19.

- Mothaíonn 38.42% nár éirigh chomh maith leo mar gheall ar measúnú malartach, agus 17.05% ag rá gur éirigh níos fearr leo.

- Luaigh beagnach 80% de mhic leinn go raibh an easpa spreagtha ar cheann de na bacainní is mó a bhí rompu. Thuairiscigh níos lú ná trian fadhb le rochtain ar nasc idirlíne. Mhothaigh 35% de mhic leinn nach raibh rochtain cuí acu ar ábhar foghlama ar líne.

- Bhí comhpháirtithe, baill foirne agus acmhainní an Choláiste ar na príomhfhoinsí tacaíochta do mhic léinn le linn na tréimhse.

Key Recommendations:

- More structured and systematic means of accessing online content, with a more consistent use of online platforms across all teaching staff.

- Ensure that all online content is delivered in a manner that makes it accessible to all students e.g. those with connectivity problems.

- Ensure that online content is accessible for students from all backgrounds e.g. that text files are screen reader compatible.

- Training and support for using digital tools, particularly for uploading of assignments and online examinations.

- Full access to required learning resources online, where physical access to libraries cannot be facilitated e.g. ensure all databases are accessible off campus.

- Provisions to be put in place for students who do not have access to devices, or live in low connectivity areas.

- Institutions to put in place more regular communication with students, and avoid bunching of assessment deadlines.

- The Government to more openly acknowledge the issues being experienced by third-level students and endeavour to address the underfunding of the tertiary education sector.

Príomh-mholtaí

- Bealaí níos structúrtha agus córasach le teacht ar ábhar foghlama ar líne, agus go mbainfear úsáid níos rialta as ardáin ar líne i measc an fhoireann múinteoireachta

- Cinntiú go dtugtar ábhar ar líne i mbealach atá inrochtana do gach mac léinn m.sh. iad siúd le fadhbanna nascachta.

- Cinntiú go bhfuil an t-ábhar foghlama inrochtana do mhic léinn as gach cúlra m.sh go mbeadh cáipéisí téascsa comhoiriúnach do léitheoirí scáileáin.

- Traenáil agus tacaíocht le huirlisí digiteacha a úsáid, go háirithe le tascanna a uaslódáil agus scrúduithe ar líne.

- Rochtain iomlán ar acmhainní foghlama riachtanacha ar líne, san áit nach féidir teacht ar leabharlanna go fisiciúil m.sh cinntiú go bhfuil bunachair ar fail as campas.

- Go ndéanfar socruithe do mhic léinn nach bhfuil rochtain acu ar ghléasanna nó a bhfuil cónaí orthu i gceantar gan nascacht mhaith.

- Go ndéanfaidh Institiúidí Tríú Leibhéal cumarsáid níos rialta le mic léinn agus gan tascanna a bheith ag teacht salach ar a chéile.

- Go n-aithneodh an Rialtas na fadhbanna atá le sárú ag mic léinn tríú leibhéal agus iarracht a dhéanamh dul i ngleic leis an easpa maoinithe don earnáil oideachas tríú leibhéal.

Accommodation & Finance | Lóistín agus Airgeadas

This section focused on the financial wellbeing of students in the context of COVID-19, as well as any impact that COVID-19 had on their accommodation situation.

Díríonn an chuid seo ar leas airgeadais na mac léinn i gcomhthéacs COVID-19, chomh maith le haon tionchar a d'imir COVID-19 ar chúrsaí lóistín.

Key Findings:

- Over a third (36.69%) of respondents were not aware of the Student Assistance Fund in their college.

- Almost a third (29.18%) of students have lost employment as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

- Almost 3/5th (59.72%) of students are concerned, very concerned or extremely concerned about their ability to manage financially over the next year.

- Almost a quarter (23.77%) of students were unable to be released early from their accommodation contract

Príomhthorthaí

- Ní raibh eolas ag níos mó ná trian (36.69%) d'fhreagróirí ar an gCiste Cúnamh do Mhic Léinn.

- Chaill beagnach trian (29.18%) de mhic léinn a bpost mar gheall ar an ngéarchéim COVID-19.

- Tá beagnach trí chúigiú (58.72%) de mhic léinn buartha, an-bhuartha nó thar a bheith bhuartha faoi bheith in ann deileáil ó thaobh cúrsaí airgid de don chéad bhliain eile.

- Ní raibh beagnach ceathrú (58.72%) de dhaoine in ann éirí as a gconradh lóistín go luath

Key Recommendations:

- Improve promotion of the Student Assistance Fund and other funding supports that are available to students.

- Ensure students have access to Social Welfare or equivalent payments over the summer.

- Urgently review the financial support available to students including the SUSI Grant and Back To Education Allowance.

- Private sector accommodation providers to be urged to provide rent refunds for students who were forced to move home as a result of COVID-19.

Príomhmholtaí

- Feabhas a chur ar chur chun cinn an Chiste Cúnamh do Mhic Léinn agus tacaíochtaí airgid eile atá ar fáil do mhic léinn.

- Cinntiú gur féidir le mic léinn Leas Sóisialta nó íocaíochta comhionann a fháil thar an samhradh.

- Athbhreithniú láithreach a dhéanamh ar an tacaíocht airgeadais atá ar fáil do mhic léinn ar nós an deantas SUSI agus Liúntas chun Filleadh ar an Oideachas

- Go gcuirfear brú ar soláthróirí lóistín san earnáil phríobháideach aisíocaíochtaí cíosa do mhic léinn a raibh orthu bogadh tí mar gheall ar COVID-19.

Mental Health & Wellbeing | Meabhairshláinte agus Folláine

This section looked at how COVID-19 impacted on the health and wellbeing of students, exploring students' mental health as a result of COVID-19 and attitudes to accessing support in the context of the pandemic.

Sa chuid seo dírítear ar an tionchar a d'imir COVID-19 ar shláinte agus ar fholláine na mac léinn, ag féachaint ar meabhairshláinte na mac léinn mar gheall ar COVID-19 agus tuairimí maidir le teacht ar thacaíocht i gcomhthéacs na paindéime.

Key Findings:

- Over a third (33.94%) of students feel that their mental health is worse as a result of COVID-19.

- Over half of students (50.14%) are relying on informal supports to improve their mental health.

- Just under a quarter (23.67%) of students have been unable to access mental health supports in their college since COVID-19.

- Over a fifth of students would prefer to access face to face college (22.10%) and external mental health services (21.12%) than to access them through phonecall, online or text services.

Príomhthorthaí:

- Mothaíonn níos mó ná trian (33.94%) de mhic léinn go bhfuil a gcuid meabhairshláinte níos measa mar gheall ar COVD-19.

- Tá níos mó ná leath (50.14%) ag brath ar thacaíochtaí neamhfhoirmiúla le feabhas a chur ar a gcuid meabhairshláinte.

- Dúirt beagáinín níos lú ná ceathrú (23.67%) de mhic léinn nach raibh siad in ann teacht ar thacaíochtaí meabhairshláinte sa choláiste ó thús COVID-19.

- B'fhearr níos mó ná cúigiú de mhic léinn freastal ar sheirbhísí mheabhairshláinte sa choláiste (22.105) nó go seachtrach (21.12%) ná freastal orthu trí ghlaoch fóin, ar líne, nó seirbhísí téacsa.

Key Recommendations:

- Put in place previously agreed funding for college mental health supports to deal with capacity issues.

- Prioritise mental health services when putting in place arrangements for the return to campus to facilitate students who are uncomfortable accessing them at home.

- Improve promotion of mental health services within colleges so all students are comfortable accessing services.

Príomh-mholtaí:

- Maoiniú a socraíodh cheana a chur i bhfeidhm do tacaíochtaí meabhairshláinte le dul i ngleic le fadhbanna maidir le hacmhainní.

- Áit tosaíochta a thabhairt do sheirbhísí meabhairshláinte nuair atá socruithe á dhéanamh le filleadh ar champas le cuidiú le mic léinn nach bhfuil compordach úsáid a bhaint astu sa bhaile.

- Feabhas a chur ar sheirbhísí meabhairshláinte i gcoláistí go mbeadh na mic léinn ar fad compordach úsáid a bhaint as na seirbhísí

Whole Report | An Tuairisc Iomlán

Q.6 Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

Students were asked to respond to the following statements using a Likert Scale rating, ranging from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree'.

a.   'My college has provided online learning opportunities required as a result of the COVID-19 crisis'

Although the majority of students responded positively to this statement, many noted that the availability of online materials largely depended on the individual lecturer in place.
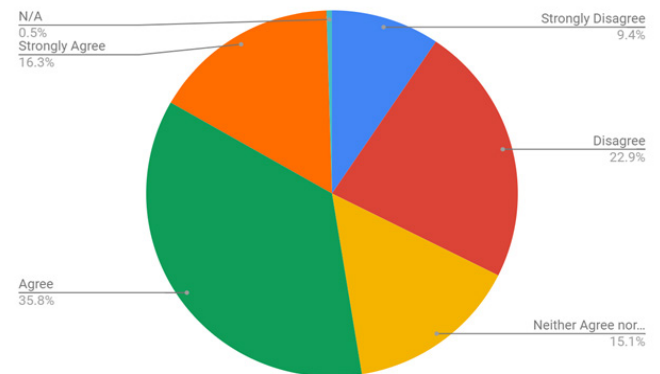

N/A 0.5%
Strongly Agree 22.1%
Strongly Disagree 3.6%
Disagree 9.2%
Neither Agree nor... 9.7%
Agree 54.9%
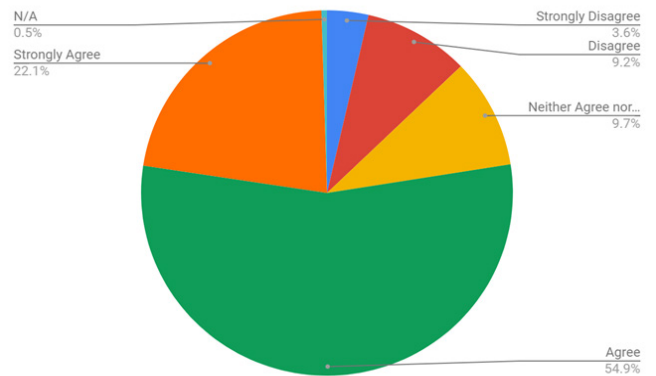
b.   'I am able to access the online learning sufficiently to complete my studies.

Again, most (77%) were in agreement. Free Text responses indicate that the 12.8% of respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed mostly had issues regarding broadband speed or access to electronic devices. Some others cited issues accessing electronic copies of core textbooks.
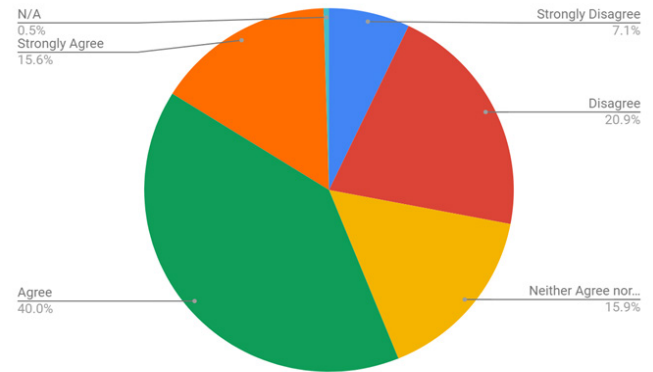

N/A 0.5%
Strongly Agree 22.1%
Strongly Disagree 3.6%
Disagree 9.2%
Neither Agree nor... 9.7%
Agree 54.9%
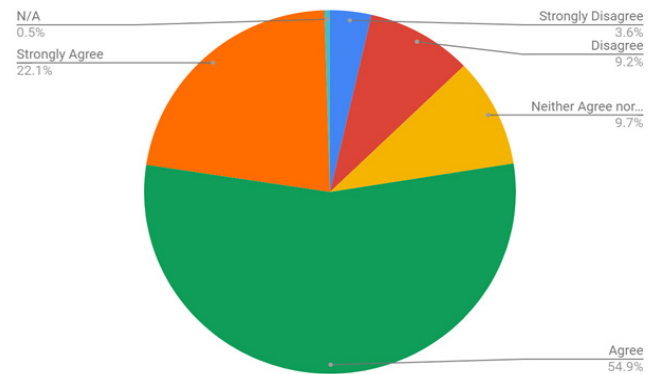
c.   'My college provided me with effective and timely communication about the move to online teaching.

Although the majority of respondents (52.1%) agreed with this statement, there was a much higher (32.3%) level of disagreement than for previous questions. Most of the comments indicated a level of frustration at 'slow communication' from the college, with others noting that online teaching about some modules was communicated more effectively than others.


N/A 0.5%
Strongly Agree 16.3%
Strongly Disagree 9.4%
Disagree 22.9%
Neither Agree nor... 15.1%
Agree 35.8%

Learning Teaching & Assessment | Foghlaim Múineadh agus Measúnú

d. 'Sufficient support was in place to enable me to continue my studies throughout the COVID-19 period.'

There was a majority (55.6%) in agreement with this statement, but again, a considerable level of disagreement (28%). Many of the free text responses noted that the level of support varied between lecturers, with many feeling that much of their learning was self-directed with limited guidance available to them.

N/A 0.5%
Strongly Agree 15.6%
Strongly Disagree 7.1%
Disagree 20.9%
Neither Agree nor... 15.9%
Agree 40.0%

e. 'I had opportunities to engage with my classmates, formally and informally'

Over a third of respondents (35.5%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, whilst just over 48% agreed or strongly agreed. Some of those who had opportunities to engage with their classmates did this through platforms like Zoom or MS Teams using breakout room features, or informally through class group chats. Those who didn't have opportunities to engage with their classmates felt that the format of online learning (recorded lectures and powerpoints) didn't allow collaboration and communication between the class.

N/A 0.4%
Strongly Agree 13.2%
Strongly Disagree 11.8%
Disagree 23.7%
Neither Agree nor... 16.0%
Agree 34.9%
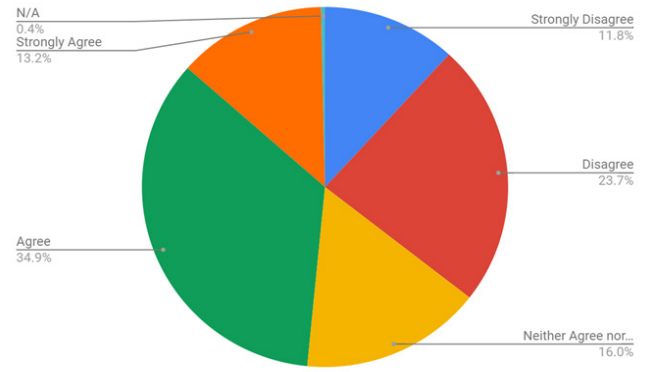
f. 'I had opportunities to engage with my tutor/s'

The majority of respondents (60.4%) agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, with just over a fifth (21.9%) disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Those who responded positively talked about the use of discussion boards, online classes and regular email communications. Again, the issue of consistency came up with some stating that communication from lecturers was inconsistent across the board.
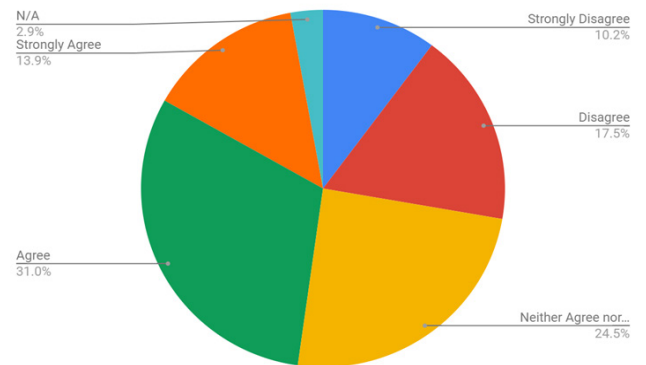
N/A 0.7%
Strongly Agree 13.3%
Strongly Disagree 5.6%
Disagree 16.3%
Neither Agree nor... 16.9%
Agree 47.1%
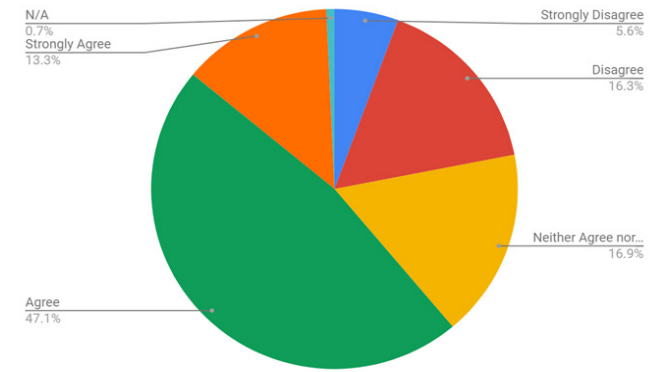
g. 'Alternative arrangements for assessment were communicated in a timely manner to allow me time to prepare'

Over half (58.6%) agreed or strongly agreed, whilst just over a quarter (26.9%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. Comments indicated that changes to original assessment formats were not clearly communicated. A number of respondents felt that information on how exams were being conducted e.g. open book/closed book was not made available far enough in advance. Consistency across modules came up again, with some noting that arrangements for certain assessments were communicated quicker and more transparently than others.

N/A 0.8%
Strongly Agree 18.9%
Strongly Disagree 8.5%
Disagree 18.4%
Neither Agree nor... 13.7%
Agree 39.7%
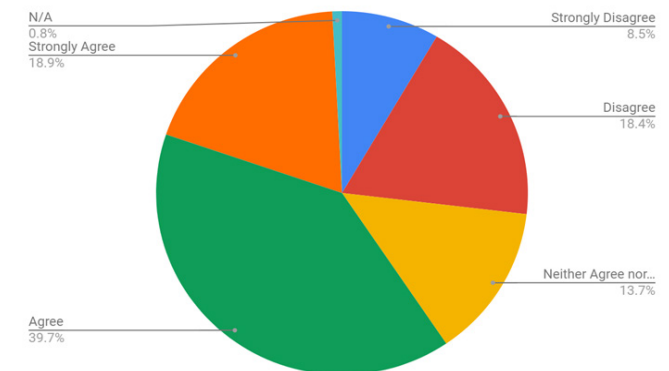
h.   'Fair arrangements were put in place to ensure the marking of assessments took into account potential disruption resulting from COVID-19'

There was no majority either in agreement (44.9%), or in disagreement (27.7%) with this statement with just under a quarter of respondents indicating a neutral stance on this statement. Many of those in agreement with the statement noted that arrangements were communicated around 'no academic disadvantage' policies in their college. Others weren't aware of what arrangements were in place within their colleges, or felt unable to comment until they had received their results.
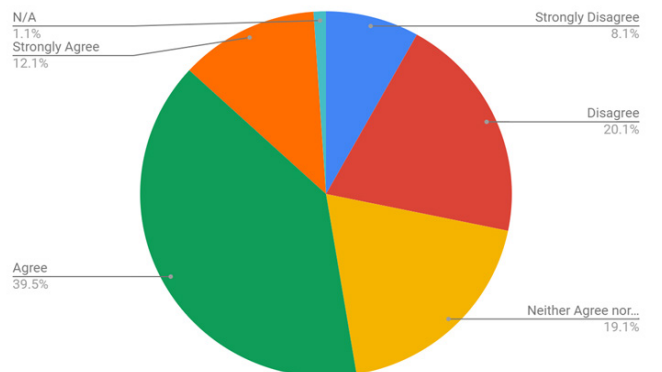
N/A 2.9%
Strongly Agree 13.9%
Agree 31.0%
Strongly Disagree 10.2%
Disagree 17.5%
Neither Agree nor… 24.5%

i.   'My specific needs and potential circumstances were given due consideration by my college'

Although there were just under 40% in agreement with this statement, there was a significant proportion (35.1%) who remained neutral or clicked N/A on this statement, with just over a quarter (25.9%) disagreeing with the statement. Comments indicated that students with disabilities including mental health issues and students with poor internet connections were amongst the most adversely impacted by the move to online learning. The experiences of these groups varied, with some reporting a high degree of flexibility from their college, and others citing issues with inaccessible learning material, difficulties in accessing their usual supports in a remote learning environment and inflexibility regarding extensions.

N/A 10.4%
Strongly Agree 10.5%
Agree 28.5%
Strongly Disagree 9.0%
Disagree 16.9%
Neither Agree nor… 24.7%
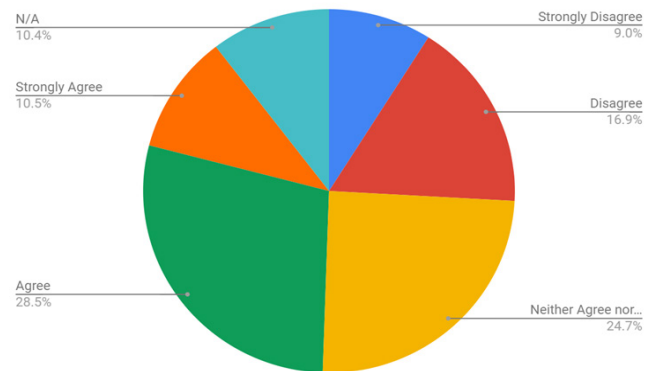
j.   'Overall, the online content offered to me was of good quality'

Just over half (51.6%) agreed with this statement, with 28.5% in disagreement and just under a fifth (19.1%) remaining neutral. Again, comments indicate that the experience varied from programme to programme, and between individual modules. Those on practically-based programmes, and maths students were more likely to indicate issues with the quality of online content. The general consensus from the free text comments was that a more consistent approach to online learning would be appreciated.

N/A 1.1%
Strongly Agree 12.1%
Agree 39.5%
Strongly Disagree 8.1%
Disagree 20.1%
Neither Agree nor… 19.1%

Learning Teaching & Assessment | Foghlaim Múineadh agus Measúnú

7. Do you feel that the learning outcomes of your programme were significantly different as a result of COVID-19?
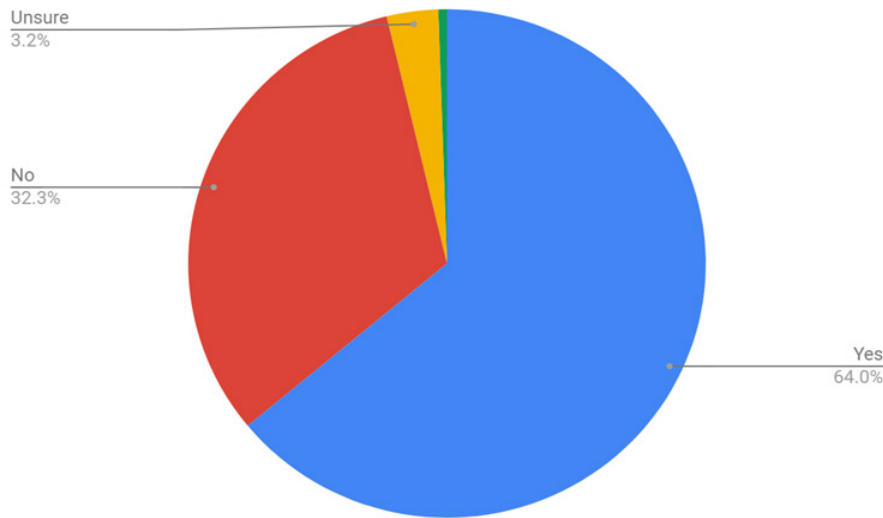

Just under two-thirds of respondents felt that the learning outcomes of their programme were significantly changed as a result of COVID-19, with just under a third feeling that they were not. Of those who said Yes, a large number felt that the replacement of practical assessments with written assignments had significantly altered the learning outcomes for the programme. The issue of 'learning for assessment' rather than assessing their learning also came up. Of those who said No, the majority acknowledged changes to assessment method but felt that this didn't significantly change the learning.

8. Overall, do you think your performance in assessment differed significantly as a result of alternative assessment?
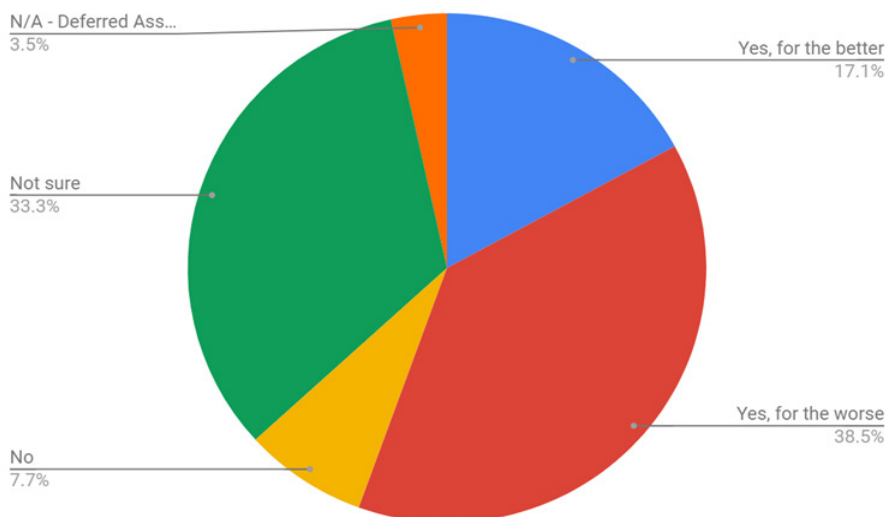

The largest proportion of respondents indicated that they feel their performance has worsened as a result of the alternative assessments, with a third being unsure, under a fifth (17.7%) feeling that they performed better and 7.7% believing that their performance has not been significantly affected. Looking through the comments,unsuitable work spaces, lack of access to resources, bunching of assessments and lack of additional support were the main reasons cited by those who feel their performance has been worse. Those who feel they performed better felt that the use of open book exams and assessments worked to their favour. Those who were unsure felt that their performance varied across various assessment types - some felt that they performed better but learned less through the assessment modes used.

### 9. What worked well about the alternative assessment/s?
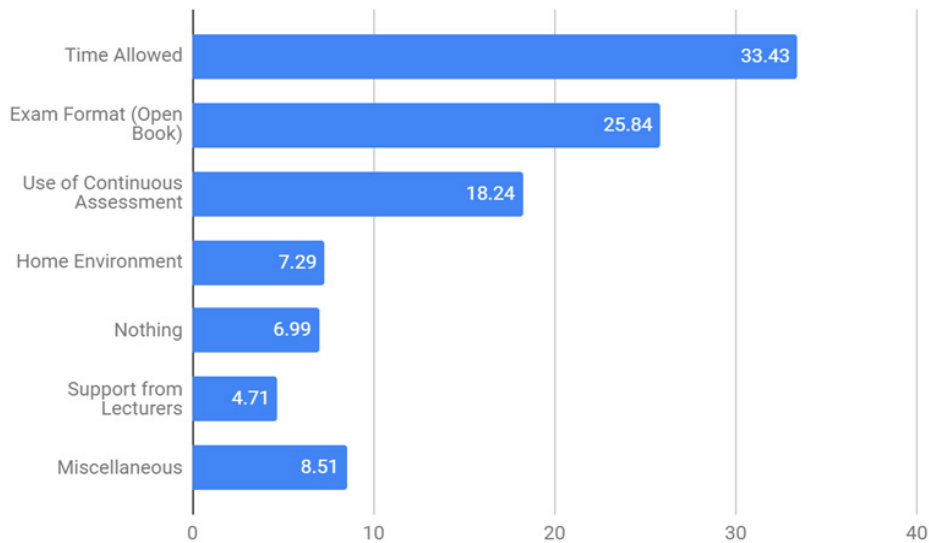
Given that this was a **free text question,** the nature of responses varied greatly. Most notably, around a third of respondents made reference to the time allowed for assignments. This was particularly true of completing exams online, with many noting that additional time was allocated for uploading their completed exam. The use of alternative formats such as MCQ and open book for exams was praised, as was the increased use of continuous assessments. Some also felt that the ability to complete exams and assessments at home was more comforting than the traditional exam hall setting.

10. What would you have improved about the alternative assessments?
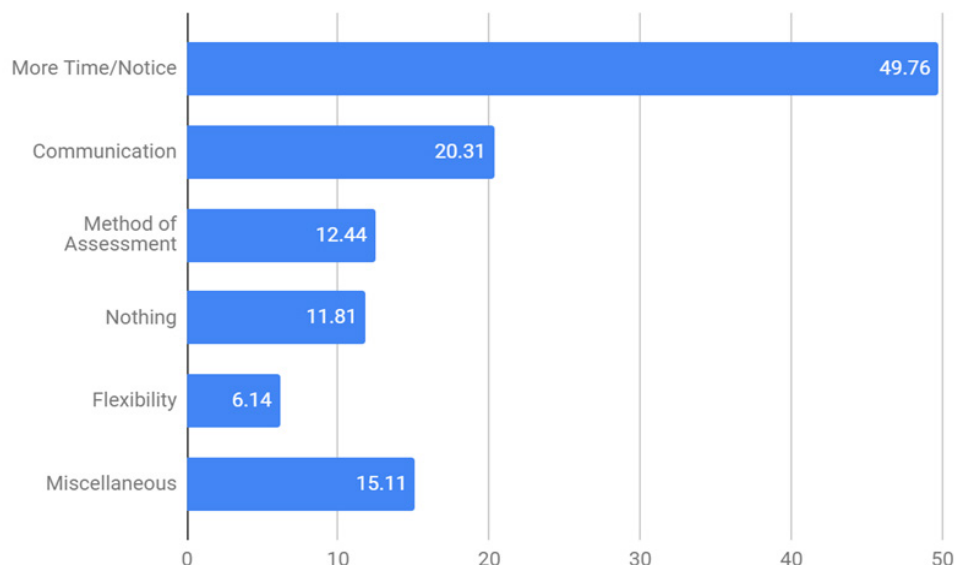
Again, there was a relatively varied range of answers given but almost half (49.76%) of respondents made reference to the time and notice given for assignments, suggesting both increased time to complete assignments and further notice given before assignments were due. Over a fifth (20.33%) cited increased communication as a key improvement - this largely encompassed further guidance on assessments and more structured means of communication with staff e.g. digital office hours. 12.44% of respondents referenced the method of assessment used. A key finding from this area was that some of the platforms used for conducting online examinations didn't allow students to go back on their answers, something which caused stress for a number of respondents.

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11. Did you feel particularly disadvantaged by the alternative assessments? If so, how?
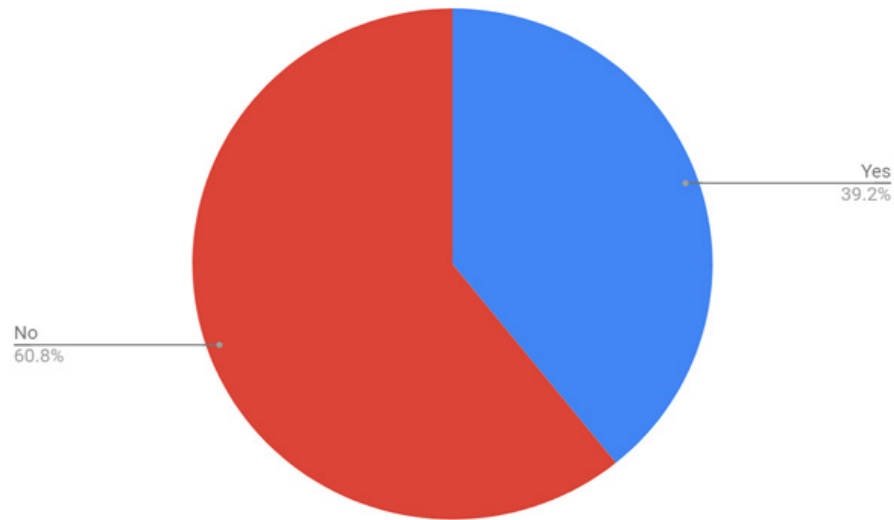
Around three fifths felt that they weren't disadvantaged by the alternative assessments, with just under two fifths indicating that they did feel disadvantaged. Of those who did feel disadvantaged, over a fifth listed Devices/Wifi (22.32%) or the Assessment Type used (22.38%) as the main reason for this disadvantage. 17.33% of the free text responses talked about inadequate space to study at home, with 14.08% citing lack of support including support for learning disabilities as a cause of disadvantage to them.

❝   "I felt less motivated as I didn't have to get up and go to college. Online learning was ok but I think the virtual environment wasn't great and it put more empathise on online platform instead of classroom based learning where you can get information first hand as verbal communication and this way message would be put it and you might miss something."

"My internet is incredibly slow and unreliable and my laptop was barely working for most of quarantine. These 2 factors made work incredibly hard to complete. I also was not able to participate in online lectures effectively because of this."

" I myself am a mature student with a young child. Finding the time to concentrate on assessments was difficult at times"

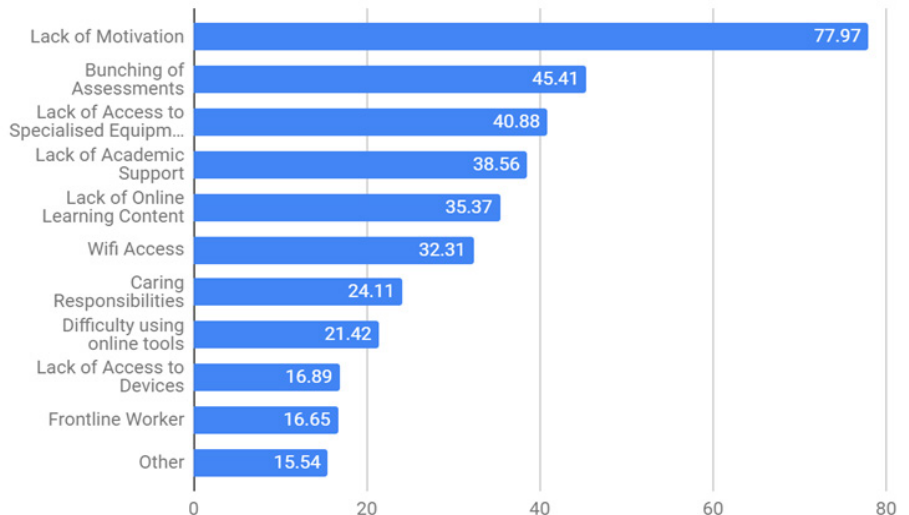"I felt there was an assumption that everyone has an equal study space."

12. Did your personal circumstances change as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

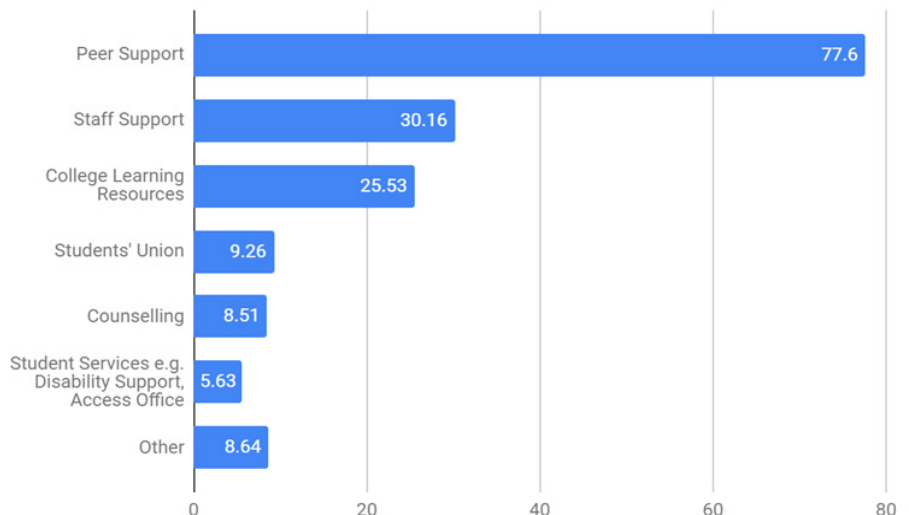Around 56% noted changes in their personal circumstances as a result of COVID-19.

No
43.4%

Yes
56.6%

13. What were the main obstacles that you encountered? Tick all that apply.

Over three quarters (77.97%) cited lack of motivation as an issue for them. Other notable issues flagged were Bunching of Assessments (45.41%), Lack of Access to Specialist Equipment (40.88%) and Lack of Academic Support (38.56%). The majority of the issued flagged under 'Other' related to illness or bereavement, and inadequate study space at home.

Obstacle	%
Lack of Motivation	77.97
Bunching of Assessments	45.41
Lack of Access to Specialised Equipm…	40.88
Lack of Academic Support	38.56
Lack of Online Learning Content	35.37
Wifi Access	32.31
Caring Responsibilities	24.11
Difficulty using online tools	21.42
Lack of Access to Devices	16.89
Frontline Worker	16.65
Other	15.54

### 14. What were the main supports you relied upon? Tick all that apply.

Over three quarters (77.6%) relied upon other students for support during the pandemic. Just under a third (30.16%) listed staff as a support, with over a quarter (25.53%) making use of college learning resources. The majority of those who ticked other listed family members or other friends outside of the college as their main source of support.

Support	%
Peer Support	77.6
Staff Support	30.16
College Learning Resources	25.53
Students' Union	9.26
Counselling	8.51
Student Services e.g. Disability Support, Access Office	5.63
Other	8.64

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15. Looking to the next year, how could your college improve the online learning experience?

Note: This was a free text question but we have categorised responses into key areas.

Over half of responses related to the provision of online content, specifically around ensuring it is organized in a more structured way. Communication was mentioned by just under a quarter (23.82%) of respondents - largely this related to communication between staff and students with many suggesting the provision of online office hours or structured communication using the virtual learning environment. Amongst the miscellaneous responses, many requested training for staff and students on how to make best use of digital tools.
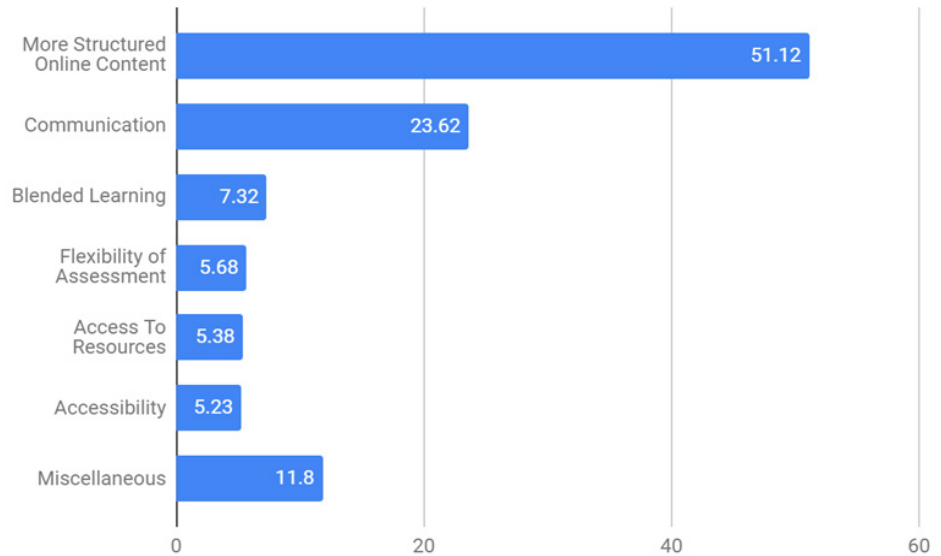
> " "Develop a timetable and deliver the lectures online live during the designated time. This will ensure students will have a routine and will be given the opportunity to ask questions and learn from their peers."

"Labs, tutorials and other academic support should be prioritized on campus along with sports and other social activities."

"Make more guidelines and training on how to utilise online tools (e.g. zoom) for both students and lecturers"

"Communication with students, complete and honest information about classes, assessments and the platform"

"Take frontline workers into consideration. Maybe screen recording zoom lectures would be a good idea so that those who missed the lecture due to work commitments can rewatch"

16. Students on professionally accredited courses: Did your college communicate with you about any professional requirement implications stemming from COVID-19? e.g. changes to placement

A little under half (45.5%) of respondents said that their college did not communicate about professional requirement implications stemming from COVID-19, with just under a third (31.0%) stating that they did and the remaining 23.5% being non-applicable. Most of those who wrote free text comments indicated that communication regarding professional requirements was slow, with many acknowledging that this was due to colleges having to liaise with professional bodies. Some of those due to undertake placement in the autumn stated that they're awaiting clarity on whether these placements will be affected by COVID-19.
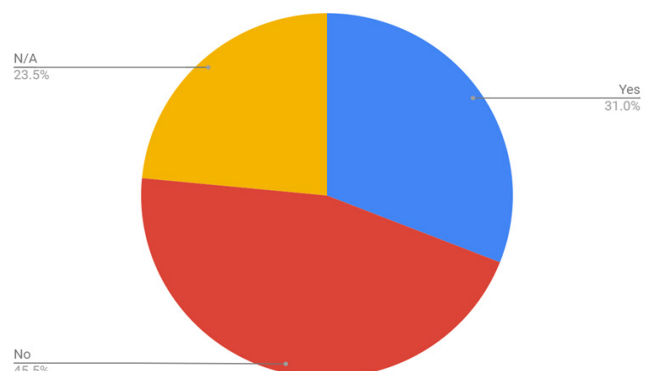
17. Is there anything specific that you would require to improve your online learning/assessment experience going forward?

A large number of responses were miscellaneous items, ranging from clarity on return dates, to access to studios and lab spaces. Over a fifth of respondents cited access to reliable wifi as a key requirement. Around 18.68% requested access to a greater range of academic materials and software packages required for their programme, with 18.38% stating the need to access devices either through laptop lending schemes or access to on campus computer labs.
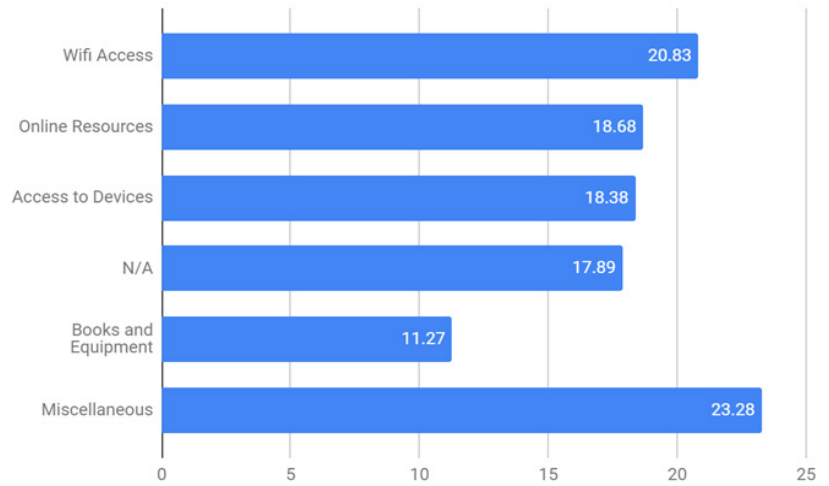

"Not to expect students to be computer geniuses... include videos on how to use specific software"

"Ensure that each student can have access at home. This was something I never had to worry about and I enjoyed studying away from home as it helped me focus better. I know students in my class who were at a major disadvantage due to computer access and it is a shame that their experience was ruined."

"Increased access to online articles and websites. Many websites with journals require paid access even with a university log-in which prevented me from accessing quite a bit of material."

"A structure to my day and some sort of accountability. As lockdown progressed, motivation waned due to a lack of the above"

**18. Were you in receipt of a SUSI Grant this year?**
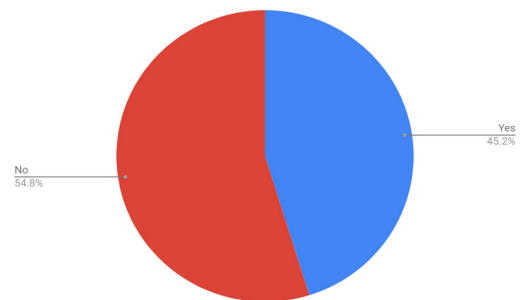
19. If you are a returning student, will you be applying for a SUSI Grant this year?

There is a noticeable increase of around 5% in the number of students planning to apply for a SUSI grant this year, compared to those currently in receipt of one.
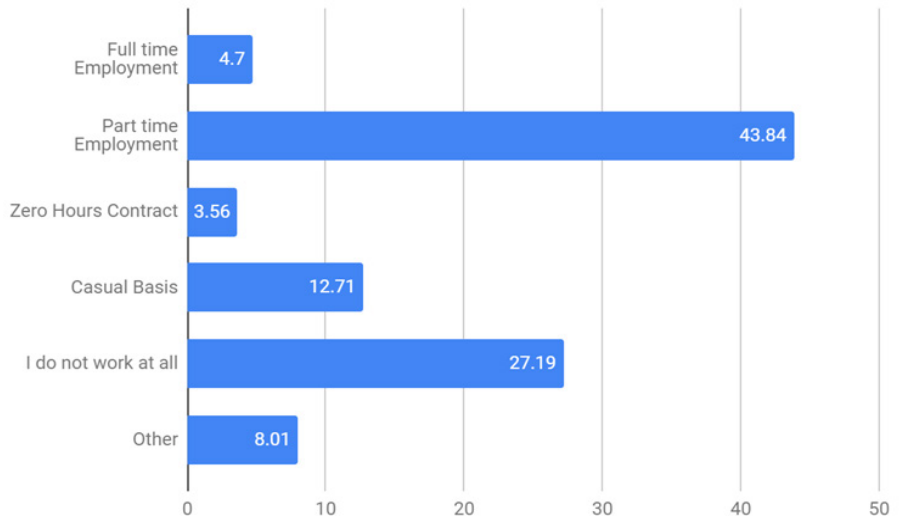

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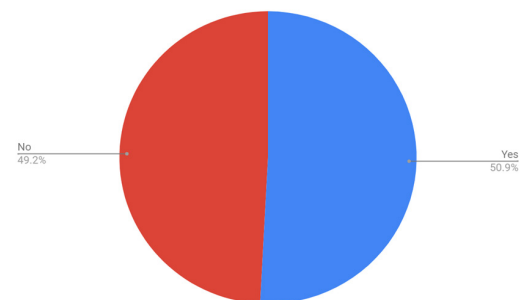
20. Are you aware of the Student Assistance Fund in your college?

Although almost two-thirds of students indicated awareness of the fund, over one-third indicated that they aren't aware of it, which is a significant number. This indicates a need to improve awareness of the fund to students, particularly in the current environment.
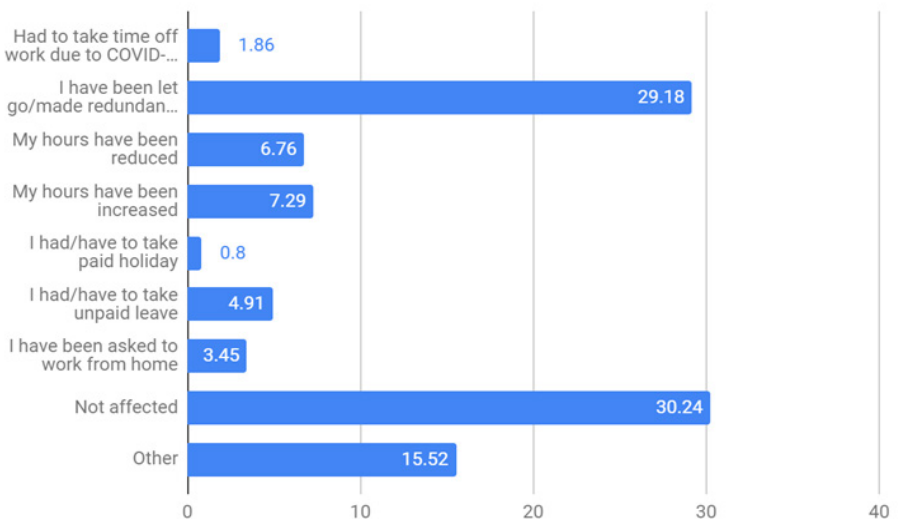
No
36.7%

Yes
63.3%
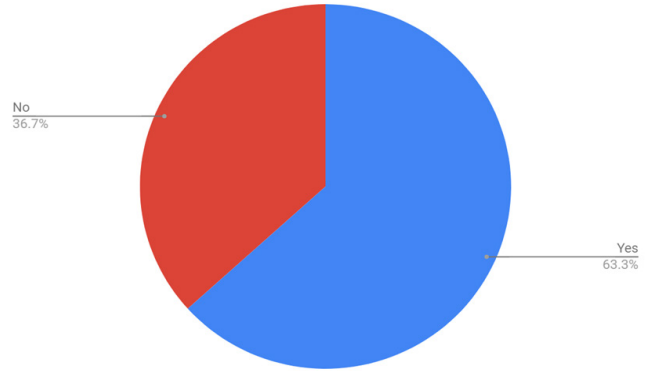
21. Do you have a job alongside your studies? If you have several, please choose your main one.

Unsurprisingly, the largest proportion of students are in part-time employment, with the next most popular option being those not in employment. The majority of those who ticked 'Other' are in self-employment, seasonal jobs or the gig economy.

Category	Value
Full time Employment	4.7
Part time Employment	43.84
Zero Hours Contract	3.56
Casual Basis	12.71
I do not work at all	27.19
Other	8.01

22. How has your work been affected by the COVID-19 issue, if at all?

Over 30% of respondents haven't been affected by COVID-19, with just under 30% of respondents having lost employment as a result of the pandemic. Many of those who clicked 'Other' did not have a job prior to the pandemic, others have been furloughed by their employer for the duration of the period.

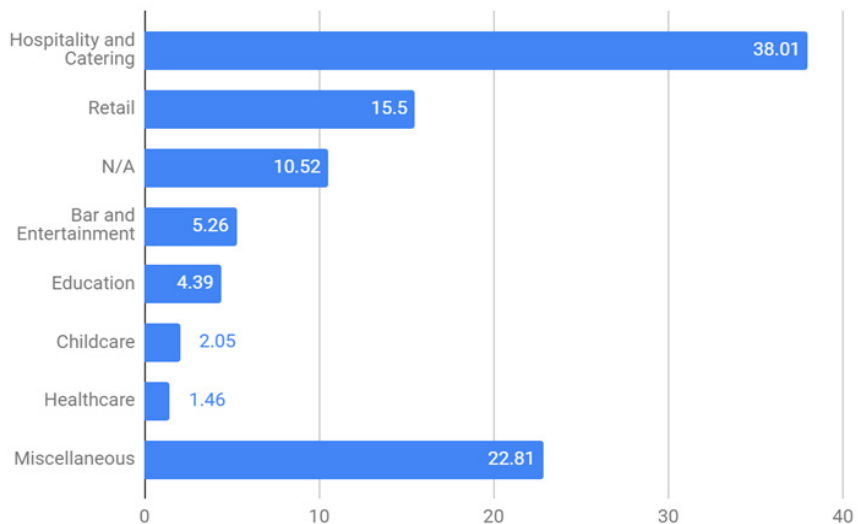| Category	Value
Had to take time off work due to COVID-...	1.86
I have been let go/made redundan...	29.18
My hours have been reduced	6.76
My hours have been increased	7.29
I had/have to take paid holiday	0.8
I had/have to take unpaid leave	4.91
I have been asked to work from home	3.45
Not affected	30.24
Other	15.52

23. If you have been let go, have you been able to access the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment?

This question was non-applicable to the majority of respondents. Of those who have been let go, 28.7% are on the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment, with 15% being unable to access this payment.
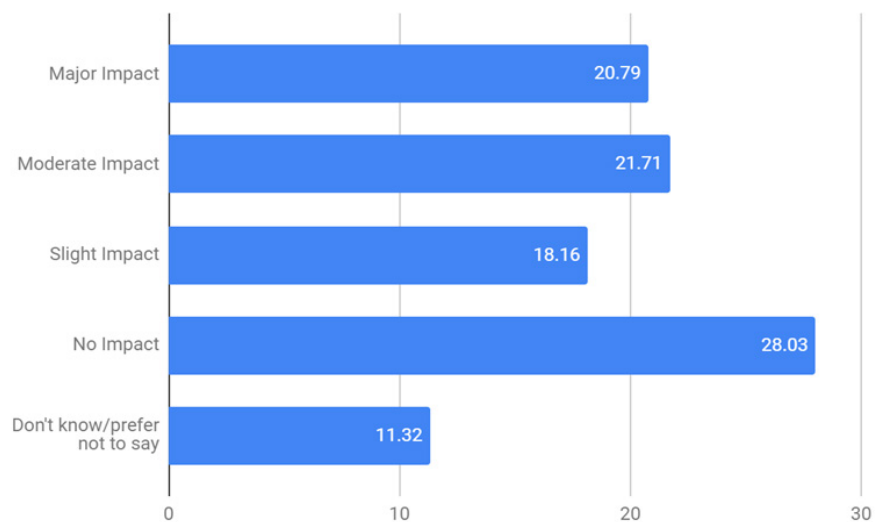
Other
2.8%

Yes
28.7%

N/A
53.6%

No
15.0%
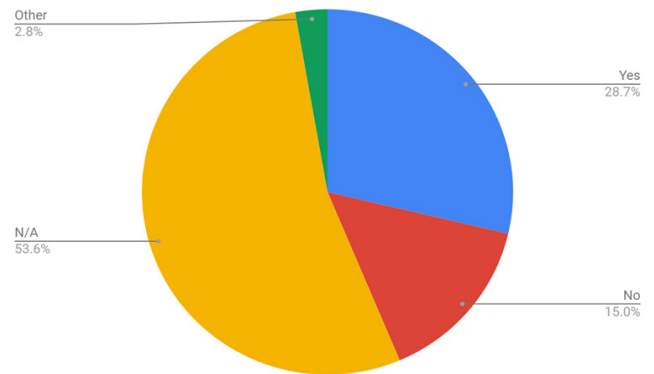
24. If you have been let go, what sector were you working in?

The sectors most notably impacted were Hospitality and Catering (38.01%) and Retail (15.50%). Amongst the Miscellaneous comments were a range of sectors including security, construction, hair & beauty and self-employed work.

Sector	Value
Hospitality and Catering	38.01
Retail	15.5
N/A	10.52
Bar and Entertainment	5.26
Education	4.39
Childcare	2.05
Healthcare	1.46
Miscellaneous	22.81

25. Has the income of someone who helps to support you financially been impacted by the COVID-19 issue?

The highest number of respondents answered that COVID-19 had no impact, but it's also worth noting that over a fifth reported that it had a moderate (21.71%) and major impact (20.79%) respectively.

Impact	Value
Major Impact	20.79
Moderate Impact	21.71
Slight Impact	18.16
No Impact	28.03
Don't know/prefer not to say	11.32

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26. Are you concerned about your ability to manage financially in the next academic year/post-graduation?

The majority of students (59.8%) are concerned to extremely concerned about their ability to manage financially over the next year, with just 6.8% stating that they are not at all concerned.
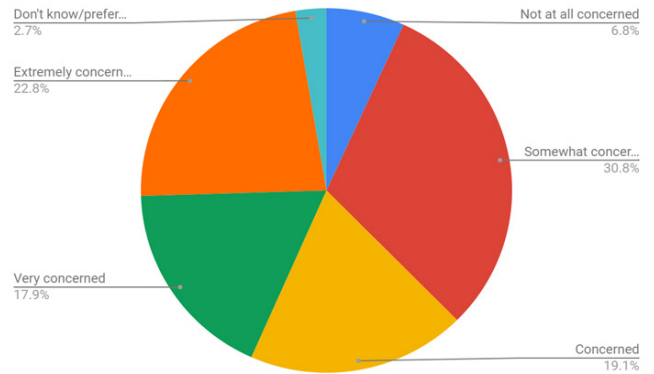

27. Which of the following best describes your usual term time living circumstances before the COVID-19 outbreak?

Over a third of respondents (34.18%) were living with parents/guardians, whilst just over a quarter (26.81%) were renting privately with friends. Just under 10% were living in college owned or privately owned halls
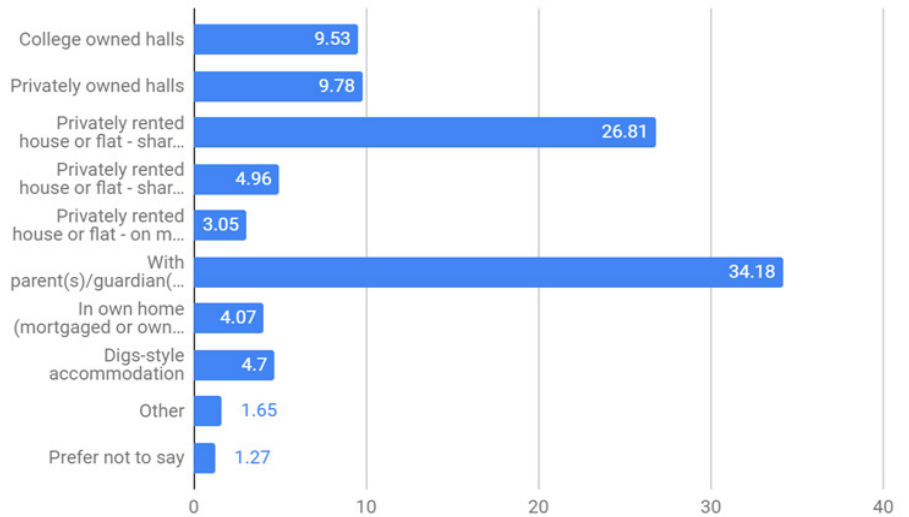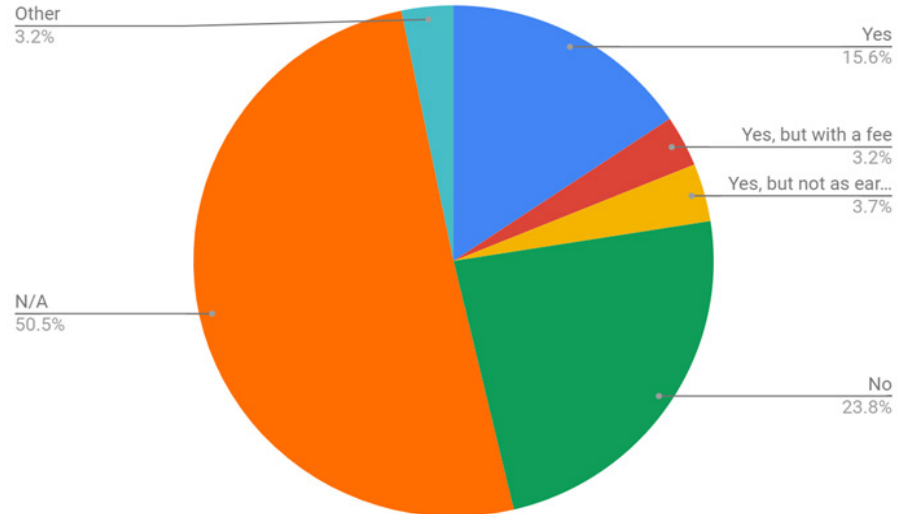

28. If your living circumstances have recently changed as a result of COVID-19, please select the option which best reflects where you are now.

Just under half of respondents are now living with parents/guardians as a result of COVID-19, with the majority of the remainder remaining in the same type of accommodation they had been living in prior to COVID-19.
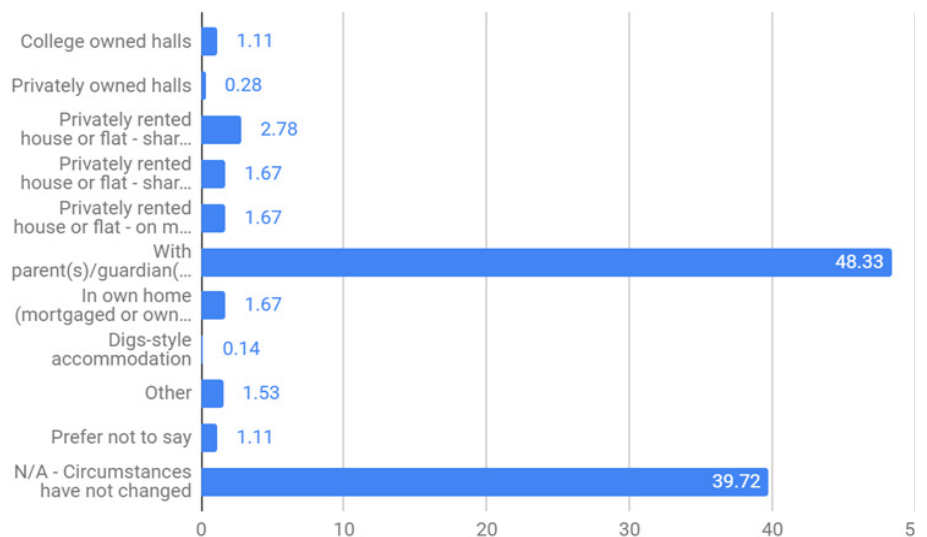
29. If you usually live away from home during term time and have moved out due to COVID-19, has your landlord/accommodation provider offered you the opportunity to be released early from your current tenancy/rent obligations as a result of COVID-19?

For those whom the question applied to, the majority (23.8%) have been unable to be released early from their tenancy/rent obligations as a result of COVID-19. Around 15% were able to be released with a further 6.9% being released with a fee, or at a later point than they would have liked.
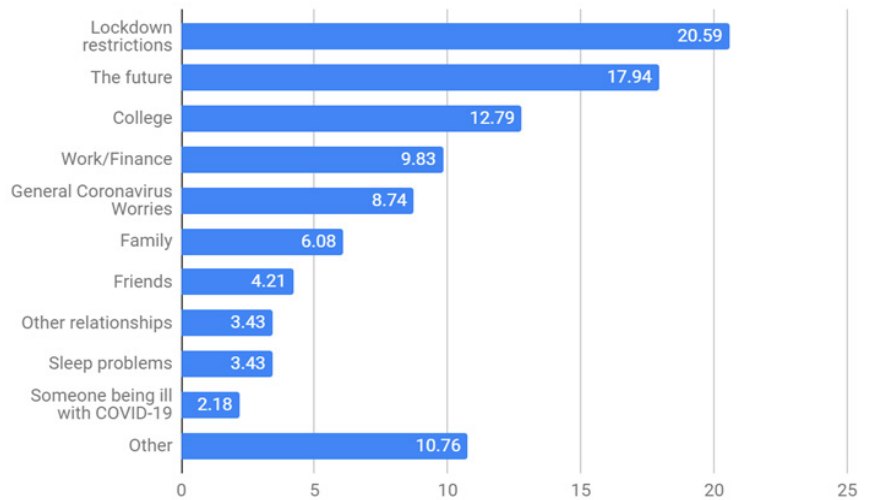
Other
3.2%

Yes
15.6%

Yes, but with a fee
3.2%

Yes, but not as ear...
3.7%

N/A
50.5%

No
23.8%

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30. As a result of COVID-19, do you feel your mental health is

The majority of students feel that their mental health has changed as a result of COVID-19 with just under half (48.6%) stating that it varies a lot and over a third (33.9%) stating that it's worse than before. Less than 5% of respondents answered that their mental health is better than previously.

The same as before 12.8%

Better than before 4.6%

Worse than before 33.9%

It varies a lot 48.6%
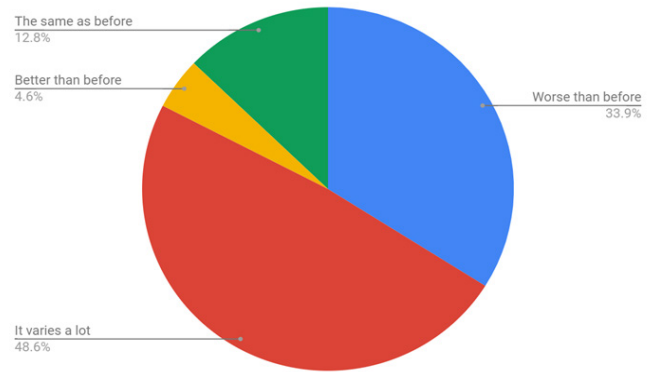
31. If your mental health is worse than before or varies a lot, please select the main reason you feel that is:

Over a fifth (20.59%) of the respondents feel that lockdown restrictions were the main cause of mental health difficulties during the COVID-19 period, with just under a fifth (17.94%) citing the future as the key concern. College is the main reason for difficulties in 12.79% of respondents. Of the 10% who selected 'Other', the majority stated that it was due to a combination of the above factors.


Lockdown restrictions	20.59
The future	17.94
College	12.79
Work/Finance	9.83
General Coronavirus Worries	8.74
Family	6.08
Friends	4.21
Other relationships	3.43
Sleep problems	3.43
Someone being ill with COVID-19	2.18
Other	10.76

❝ "I have found myself getting upset so easily. I have been down and often stay in my room. I live in the country and none of my friends lived within the 5km radius. I felt alone and also at a loss as what to do with myself from the lack of things to do and from also losing my job."

32. If your mental health is better than before COVID-19 restrictions were imposed, can you tell us why you feel that is?
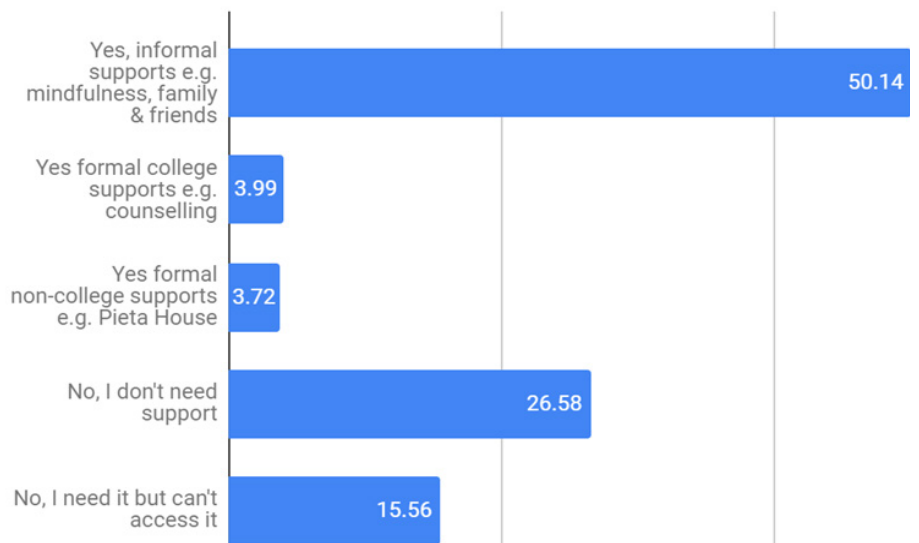
Note: This was a freetext question but we have categorised responses into key areas.

Over two fifths of respondents (43.37%) talked about lockdown offering the opportunity for them to follow a healthier routine where they could eat healthy meals and exercise more. Just under a third (31.88%) talked about the opportunity to live life at a slower pace. The opportunity to spend more time with family was listed by 18.84% of respondents. Other factors mentioned under Miscellaneous include accessing counselling and other relationships.
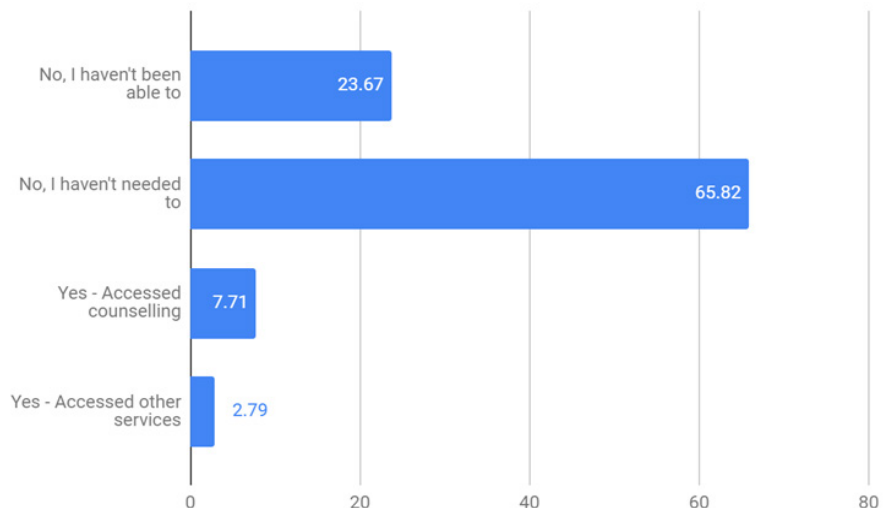

Healthy Routine	43.47
Slower Pace	31.88
Family	18.84
Miscellaneous	14.49
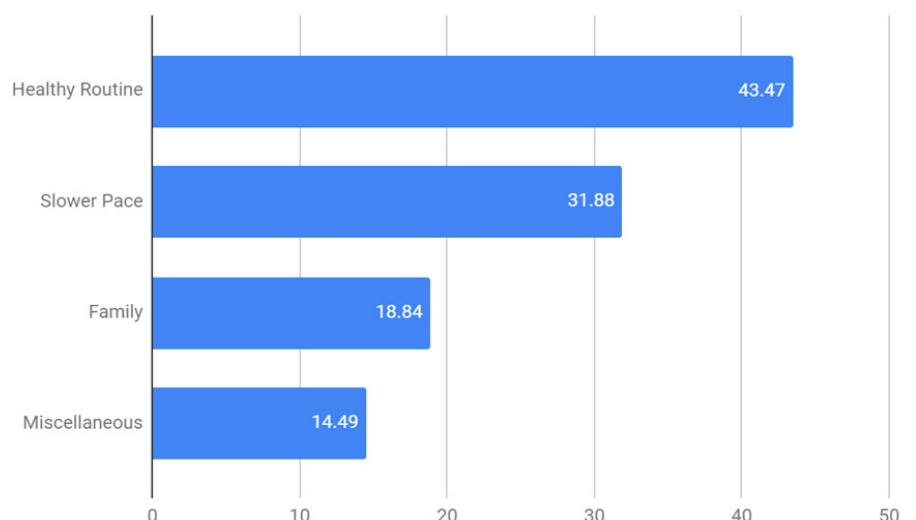
33. Do you feel your mental health is supported at the moment? Please select the most applicable answer.

Over half of respondents (50.14%) are relying on informal mental health supports such as family and friends. Over a quarter (26.58%) stated that they don't feel that they need support. Just under 16% need support but cannot currently access it, with just over 7% of respondents indicating that they're currently availing of formal mental health support through the college or an external service.
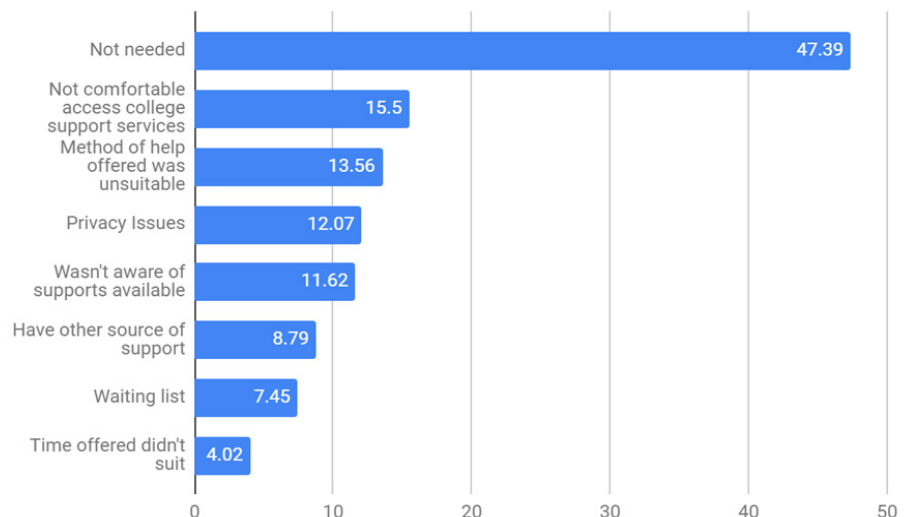
Category	%
Yes, informal supports e.g. mindfulness, family & friends	50.14
Yes formal college supports e.g. counselling	3.99
Yes formal non-college supports e.g. Pieta House	3.72
No, I don't need support	26.58
No, I need it but can't access it	15.56

34. Have you accessed Counselling or other mental health services in your college since COVID-19?

The majority (65.82%) of respondents indicated that they didn't need to access counselling services. However, notably, just under a quarter (23.67%) reported not being able to access counselling services in the college. Just under 8% reported having accessed counselling with another 2.79% accessing other college services such as Disability Services and studies advisors.

Category	%
No, I haven't been able to	23.67
No, I haven't needed to	65.82
Yes - Accessed counselling	7.71
Yes - Accessed other services	2.79

35. If you haven't accessed counselling or other mental health services in your college, why not?

Just under half of respondents (47.39%) felt that they did not need counselling or other mental health services. Of the remaining respondents, 15.5% were not comfortable accessing college services, with a further 13.56% feeling that the method of help offered was unsuitable. Over 10% of respondents (11.62%) were not aware of the support available to them. Some of the additional reasons outlined within the free text responses indicated a significant stigma in accessing college services, other students indicated a fear that their problems

Category	%
Not needed	47.39
Not comfortable access college support services	15.5
Method of help offered was unsuitable	13.56
Privacy Issues	12.07
Wasn't aware of supports available	11.62
Have other source of support	8.79
Waiting list	7.45
Time offered didn't suit	4.02

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weren't significant enough to require counselling. These responses give a good overview of some of the key attitudes towards counselling services amongst students, and indicate a need to review how these services are promoted to students.

" "I feel as though even though I am struggling with my mental health, if I access college support services I will be taking resources away from people who are struggling more"

"I would not feel comfortable using a phone or video chat with a counsellor i have not met in person."

"I have never gone to counselling before and there were some days I really wanted to get in touch but just never did. Not sure why exactly it just didn't happen."

"The waiting lists are too long, I'd be afraid if I accessed the supports someone who needed it more wouldn't be able to."

36. I would use the following if I needed mental health support and it was available. Please select all that apply:
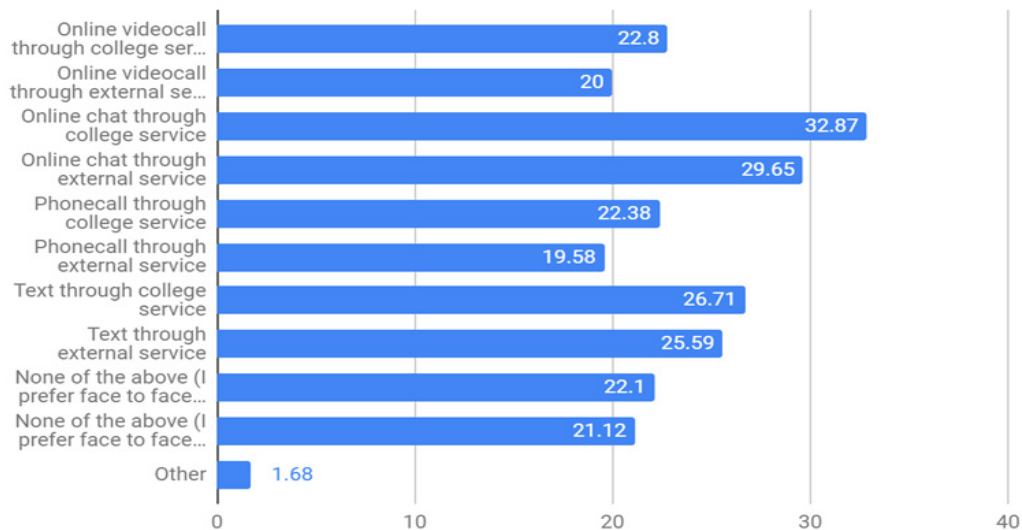
The highest preference is for online chat, with just under a third (32.87%) indicating a preference for a college online chat service, closely followed by 29.65% for an external chat service. Text is the second most popular format with over a quarter indicating a service for both college and external text services. This suggests that students may feel more comfortable accessing services anonymously. Over a fifth of students indicated that they would prefer to access face to face services. This suggests the need to prioritise delivery of mental health services on campus as part of the return to campus.

37. What can the government do for you over the next year?
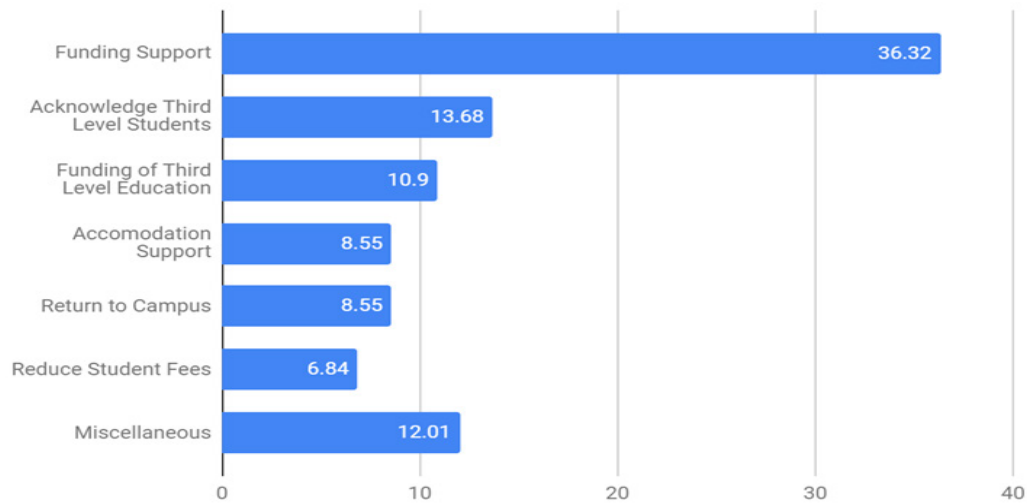
Over a third (36.32%) of respondents referenced additional funding support as a key ask of the government over the next year. This included increasing SUSI and ensuring students have access to the COVID-19 payment or some form of social welfare during the summer. There was a noticeable frustration at the Government's lack of acknowledgement of the issues facing students in third level, with many juxtaposing the lack of reference to colleges with the strong emphasis on leaving cert students. Funding of Third Level Education also came up as a key concern, with many students voicing their frustration at the lack of action in reviewing funding to the system as a whole. Amongst the comments under 'miscellaneous' were employment support for graduates emerging into the economic downturn, support for International students, and upgraded broadband.

" "For SUSI grant take into consideration the fact that guardians/parents very likely have a much lower income. Also the government should have provided some sort of Financial support for students who were searching for work for the summer but can't get a job due to job shortages as a result of Covid"
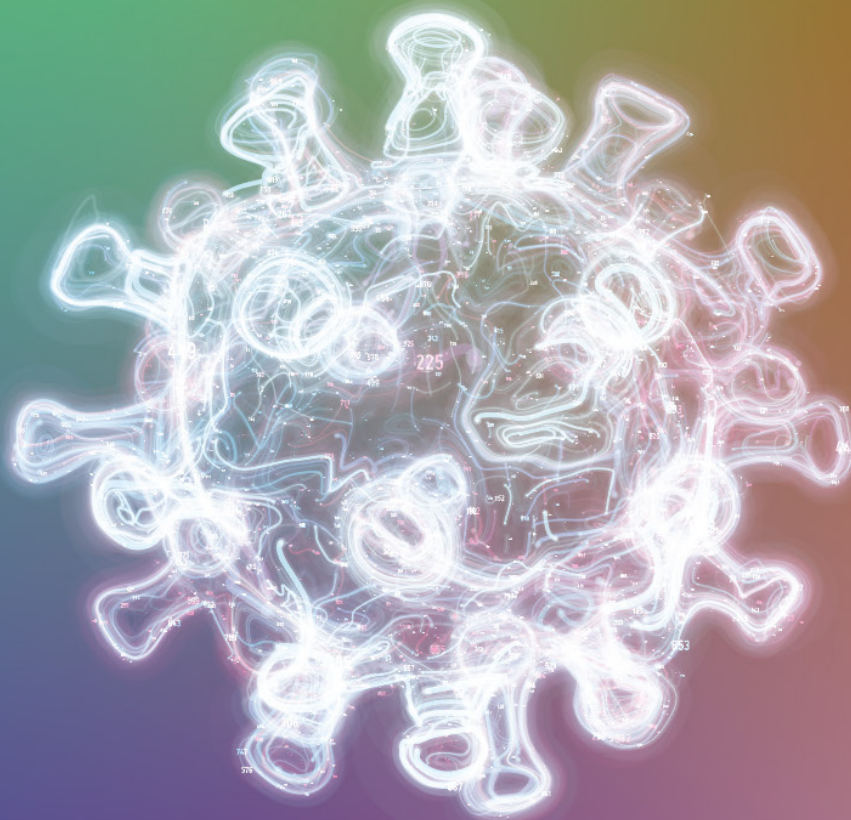
"Realise the pressure/stresses college students have faced with COVID19, as they did for leaving certificate students"

"Be more focused on all students in education, not to specifically target secondary school, eg Leaving Certificate, also provide information to College Students who are graduating."

"Make the SUSI grant more available. I am going into my postgrad with fees of €10800 and after losing employment and it is very hard to qualify for SUSI for postgrad it is a disgrace."

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The basic principle on which the students in Ireland build their Union is for the defense, promotion and organisation of the fundamental educational, welfare, economic, political, social, cultural and other interests of all the students in Ireland on a national and international level.

Article 3, Bunreacht Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn, 21 June 1959

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