



Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

Digital and Distance Learning Position Paper

November 2020

Introduction

This position paper has been developed by the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), in collaboration with our member Students' Unions, through whom we collectively represent the interests of over 374,000 third-level students across the island of Ireland. This paper has been developed in recognition of the changing teaching & learning landscape that has developed locally, nationally and internationally over the last eight months as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This paper follows on from previous reports, such as the [National Report on Students and COVID-19](#), released in July 2020 and the 'Looking Forward' paper on the [Delivery of Higher Education in Semester 1](#), released in September 2020. This paper aims to articulate some of the ongoing issues relating to digital and distance learning that have been experienced by students over the last few months and sets out the USI perspective on these issues.

As we move forward to the second semester, it is vital that students are not only considered, but meaningfully involved in decision-making around teaching arrangements, and that communication to students sets out clear expectations for the semester ahead. The use of terminology such as 'hybrid learning' must be accompanied with clear explanations around what this will mean in the context of student learning – and every effort should be made to avoid last minute changes being made as we saw in September.

USI is committed to working alongside the Department of Further & Higher Education, representative bodies, trade union bodies, sector agencies and our member Students' Unions, and their HEIs in taking these conversations forward in advance of the next semester. USI will also work closely with our sister organisation NUS-USI, and Students' Unions, HEIs and the Department for the Economy in the North to ensure that similar conversations are held there.

If you have any questions about this paper, or would like to discuss it further, please contact Kevin on education@usi.ie

This paper has been divided into four key areas:

- Digital Learning Experience
- Assessment
- Resources and Support
- Placement & Work Based Learning

Digital Learning Experience

- **Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning**

The mix between synchronous (live online) and asynchronous activities (content that can be accessed anytime) is a difficult balance to strike, particularly given the variance in learning environments across the student body. In an increasingly isolated learning environment, maintaining connection between learners is increasingly important so institutions should aim to offer some form of synchronous learning experience to all students – whilst recognizing the challenges that some students might face in engaging in this environment.

Ultimately, decisions of this nature should be made at a programme/subject level but it's important that students feed into decision-making particularly as institutions progress academic planning for the second semester.

- **Staff Support**

USI firstly wishes to acknowledge the fantastic work that has been carried out by many staff, encompassing not only lecturers but also librarians, learning technologists, technicians and many other essential staff roles since the COVID-19 pandemic first hit in March. In order to develop an engaging experience for our students, it is essential that staff are offered support – spanning from technical support with the online learning environment, alongside professional development and appropriate recognition of this through existing staff professional development frameworks and other institutional policies.

It is important to note that many staff, like students don't live in environments that are naturally conducive to effective teaching & learning, and as with students, practical support should be offered through the provision of equipment and support to address connectivity issues that may limit their ability to conduct live sessions.

- **Lecture Recording**

As noted above, many students face barriers in accessing learning online, particularly where classes are being conducted live. Whilst live learning experiences are important in maintaining connection amongst students, it must also be acknowledged that not all students will not be able to access live classes. It is therefore vital that all institutions have a comprehensive lecture recording policy that facilitates the recording of live classes in a manner that complies with all the relevant data privacy and intellectual property obligations of the institution whilst ensuring students are not prohibited from accessing learning due to no fault of their own. Closed captioning is another core element of making learning more accessible and institutions should facilitate captioning of all recordings, and live classes and provide support to staff in ensuring this is implemented.

- **Immunocompromised students**

As we move into the second semester, and there is the potential of increased on-campus activity where possible, it is important that students who are unable to attend on-campus classes for various reasons are not forgotten. Many students may find themselves unable to attend on-campus classes due to issues outside of their control such as medical advice. Whilst this will ultimately be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, institutions should have procedures in place to ensure that students are not academically disadvantaged as a result of factors outside their control.

- **Connection**

USI recognizes that the student experience goes beyond what goes on in the classroom, and that students have faced numerous barriers since the beginning of the pandemic in this regard. Student retention is contingent on the development of a sense of community and belonging with their institution – something which has been inhibited greatly by the online environment. Whilst USI recognizes the need to ensure the need of staff and students alike, efforts must continue to be made to support the fostering of community through formal and informal supports, and practical support for club and society, and Students' Union activity. It's important to note that a sense of community isn't developed by one or two on-campus lectures a month if other key elements of the student experience are not available. When considering how to develop a sense of community on campus, particularly amongst first year students, HEIs should work closely with student representatives to co-create solutions.

Assessment

- **Online Proctoring**

The use of online software packages to monitor screen activity by students, otherwise known as proctoring, is something that has provoked debate internationally. From a student perspective, there are several concerns regarding the use of online proctoring. Firstly, it has the potential to increase anxiety during what is likely to be an already stressful period for students. Furthermore, there are some data privacy concerns surrounding the use of some of these software packages.

It should also be acknowledged that some institutions have opted to use informal solutions to online proctoring through existing platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom. USI believes that the integrity of assessment is best upheld through assessment design and not using third-party software, and therefore believes that online proctoring should be avoided where possible as a form of assessment monitoring. Many institutions demonstrated great innovation through assessment during the original pivot, offering assessment solutions that supported student learning in a manner on par, or superior to traditional examinations.

- **Assessment Load**

Assessment load is an issue that often comes up in discussion amongst student representatives but is particularly timely in the current environment. Many students have reported particularly heavy assessment load during the current semester – noting that the burden that this place feels even greater in a mostly remote learning environment.

As previously mentioned, this is an issue that can be best addressed at a subject or programme level, but it is important that this is guided by an overall institutional approach to assessment that can act as a reference in designing assessment. The use of notional hours of effort to guide the design of assessments is useful but should come alongside communication between staff and students, as this will help to ensure that both parties are clear on one another's expectations.

- **Mitigation Policies**

During the previous academic year, many HEIs worked closely with their Students' Unions to develop and introduce mitigation policies dealing with the likely impact of COVID-19 on student assessment. The flexibility shown by many HEIs in extending deadlines, removing academic and financial penalties on repeat assessment and providing flexibility to their Boards of Examiners was very much welcomed.

Although the situation we find ourselves in six months later differs slightly from the original pivot, students still find themselves in anything but 'normal times'. It is therefore concerning to hear that some HEIs have moved to remove the mitigation policies previously introduced and replaced them with pre-existing policies. As outlined throughout this paper, many students are operating in less-than-ideal study environments, many are dealing with a range of personal issues brought on or accentuated by the pandemic and connectivity issues continue to prevent many students from fully engaging in their learning. We do not believe that we are in a 'normal' operating environment, and therefore pre-existing policies are ill equipped to deal with the current circumstances students find themselves in.

USI reiterates its' previous call for HEIs to demonstrate flexibility in assessment and believes that institutions should retain previously introduced mitigation policies, or work with their student representatives to introduce new policies that take account of the current environment. Simple mitigations such as allowing additional time for uploading assessments due to internet limitations should also be retained given that many students continue to experience major difficulties in accessing stable internet connection.

Resources and Support

- **Study Space and Library Access**

As we continue to operate in an uncertain environment, the importance of access to study spaces on campus has never been more keenly felt. Many students are not living in suitable study environments and find them trying to join live lectures or conduct independent study in cramped spaces, or despite poor internet connectivity. It is therefore essential that space on campus is maximised to allow students to study, engage with classes and of course, to access library resources and other essential facilities. Institutions should continue to engage with student representatives to monitor demand for on-campus access and try to maximise use of the campus estate to support safe access to these facilities, including creative use of unused spaces.

- **Software and Hardware**

In line with the previous point, it's crucial that students can avail of all the hardware and software that is required for their studies. In some cases, students may require access to specialist software that requires a subscription to access – all efforts should be made to make these subscriptions available to students who require them free of charge but where this is not possible, access to devices on campus which include relevant software should be facilitated.

Likewise, many students may require access to hardware as part of their studies and every effort should be made to ensure that students can loan or access this equipment. Finally, access to library resources including both hardcopy and digital resources is essential – USI recognizes and welcomes the efforts that have been made by library services to increase provision of e-resources.

- **Digital Content**

In line with the above, USI notes with concern the [recent statement by the Library Association of Ireland](#) regarding the digital content crisis that Irish libraries potentially face. Access to digital content in the form of e-books and e-journals is of the utmost importance in the current environment and USI echoes the calls to address the issues outlined in the statement, such as cost and availability of e-books and journal subscriptions, and reform of copyright law. USI will work with the Library Association of Ireland to support their lobbying on the digital content crisis.

Placement and Work-Based Learning

- **Students in Health-related professions**

The experience of students in healthcare related programmes has been massively impacted by COVID-19. Many students were unable to continue their placements when the pandemic first hit, with those whose placements did continue finding themselves at the frontline of the response to COVID-19 – many without pay. Students in these fields span a wide range of professions – they are the doctors, nurses, midwives, dentists, pharmacists and allied health professionals of the future.

However, many of these students face numerous barriers throughout the course of their studies – including undertaking placements without pay, and with limited support from either their college, or their placement providers. COVID-19 did not create the barriers that these students face, it shone a light on the issues that were already there. It is essential that the Government works in collaboration with professional bodies, HEIs, trade unions and student representatives to review the system of supports currently in place for students in health-related professions and greatly improve the support afforded to these students. This work should primarily be carried out on a disciplinary basis but should be inclusive of all health-related professions.

- **Student Teachers**

There has been widespread discussion of the impact of COVID-19 on primary and secondary education, and this is of direct relevance to our student teachers who are required to undertake regular placement as part of their initial teacher education. Given the impact that the pandemic has had on schools, many student teachers are left with questions and concerns about sourcing placements that meet the required hours and subjects. Many are also concerned about the provision of PPE in the classroom and issues surrounding cover for teachers without pay.

It is therefore vital that HEIs, school management, teacher unions and student representatives are involved in addressing these issues for student teachers.

- **Professional Body Engagement**

The management and oversight of any programme that leads to a professional qualification is shared between the HEI and the relevant professional body. Whilst this process is important in guaranteeing that students meet the professional requirements of the profession, and in safeguarding the interests of the public, this can sometimes lead to unclear lines of communication for students on these programmes. This has been further heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic and in some instances led to assessment being carried out under very strict conditions in order to meet the stringent professional requirements of the programme. This has included students being required to handwrite exams under timed conditions and scan or photograph them, and the use of online proctoring software as part of examinations.

Whilst USI recognizes the need for students to meet the professional requirements set out for the programme they are enrolled on; this must be balanced with an understanding of the exceptional circumstances we have found ourselves in over the last eight months. It is important that HEIs and professional bodies work together to develop flexible approaches in times of disruption. Maintaining the integrity of assessment, and subsequently the integrity of qualifications is in everyone's interests but should not come at the expense of student wellbeing. Professional Bodies and HEIs should also develop clear lines of communication with students so there is clarity around the respective areas of responsibility of both stakeholders.

- **Placement Supply**

Given the disruption that COVID-19 has caused to all sectors of society, there are likely to be pipeline impacts on placement opportunities over several years and it is important that HEIs, professional bodies and wider HE and industry stakeholders act now to mitigate the potential impact this could have for students, particularly those enrolled on programmes with strict professional requirements. COVID-19 has demonstrated the ability for everybody, the HE sector included to innovate the way we do things at short notice and placement and work-based learning should be no different in this respect.

Whilst placement and internships are integral part of the education of many students, in the event of a lesser supply of appropriate opportunities in specific disciplinary areas, innovative solutions to meeting professional placement requirements should be developed. Students and student representatives should be at the heart of co-creating these solutions.

Conclusion

The above document outlines a non-exhaustive list of the educational issues that have arisen over the last eight months as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. USI and our members recognize the great efforts that have been made to mitigate the risk of total disruption to learning posed by COVID-19, but also recognize the need to continually monitor and enhance the experience of our students. In doing so, this offers tremendous potential to co-create the future of the Higher Education landscape across the island. Academic representation structures must be used to their full potential and must feed into programme committees, staff-student fora and all institutional decision-making structures in order to develop student-centred solutions to the issues that we currently face. Students, and student representatives have played a central role in Higher Education's response to COVID-19 and it is essential that our voices continue to be listened to and acted upon as we move forward.