



**Connected Conversations:
The Teaching, Learning and Assessment
Practices Experienced in Higher Education
Colleges Association (HECA) Colleges during
the COVID-19 Pandemic**



HECA

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Association (HECA) Colleges during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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This research was carried out as part of the National Forum for
Enhancement of Teaching and Learning Next Steps Project.

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Foreword

At the Next steps for teaching and learning: moving forward together launch, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Simon Harris, remarked that “we didn’t lose one day” to highlight the dedication and determination shown by the Irish higher education community, including both staff and students since the COVID-19 pandemic began. This was a remarkable achievement under the circumstances.

The sectoral response to COVID-19 also highlighted the togetherness among all higher education institutions (HEIs), which, through knowledge sharing and mutual support, enabled the system to transform almost overnight. Largely untapped technologies and expertise were suddenly scaled up leading to new opportunities to enhance teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) for all students, while some of the cracks in the “old system” grew.

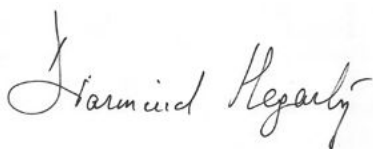
As a result of these enforced changes, HEIs have taken the opportunity to reflect on the past 18-plus months, documented their shared insights and agreed on a set of recommendations to spur positive change for staff and students in the higher education sector. The Next Steps report includes 54,000 voices from 15 different partners and showcases Ireland’s world-leading approach to TLA enhancement.

As a contributing Next Steps partner, this study explores the TLA practices selected and applied by Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) members to cope with the emergency shift to remote learning during the COVID-19 crisis. The research also focuses on how these TLA practices were experienced by all relevant stakeholders, including but not limited to lecturers and students.

Through these critical conversations, five core policy-related recommendations and 10 practice-related recommendations emerged for HECA members to consider and implement to ensure that the post-COVID TLA landscape will be more accessible, inclusive, collaborative and supportive for staff and students alike.

On behalf of all HECA members, I would like to express sincerest gratitude to the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (NFETL) for the opportunity to contribute to the Next Steps project. I would also like to thank the other 14 partners for their engagement and insights as we work together to enhance our TLA practices and approaches in evermore sophisticated, dynamic and student-centred ways.

Finally, I would like to thank the HECA steering group, Ruth Ní Bheoláin, Leo Casey and Patricia O’Sullivan for their guidance and support throughout this project; the research participants who shared their invaluable TLA experiences; and the lead researcher, Orla Butler, who tirelessly captured the detail of our peers’ experiences throughout COVID-19.



Professor Diarmuid Hegarty

Chair of HECA and President of Griffith College





1 | Introduction

The role of dialogue in higher education is vital in facilitating an open exchange and deep understanding of diverse perspectives. This title of this work, “Connected Conversations”, echoes the process of analysis and reflection undertaken by staff and students across the Higher Education Colleges Association (HECA) during a time of great disruption and transformational change in the sector.

The conversations that form the central part of this research carry important dialogues that illustrate the first-hand experiences of staff and students learning, teaching and supporting learning during the earlier stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.1 Next Steps Project

The Next Steps for Teaching and Learning: Moving Forward Together (Next Steps) project was launched by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in May 2021. The overarching aim of the project is to examine how higher education can learn from the COVID-19 pandemic. It is coordinated by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (NFETL) and funded through the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund. The Next Steps project is a collaboration between a wide range of stakeholders including the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP), the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC), the Irish Council for International Students (ICOS), a representative of specialist colleges, and HECA. The overarching aim of the Next Steps project is to address the question, in the context of COVID-19, “What have we learned and what does it mean for the future of teaching and learning in Irish higher education?”

The purpose of this publication is to specifically explore the contribution of HECA to the research they conducted for this project. HECA, established in 1991, is the representative body for 13 established and state-accredited, privately funded providers of higher education. All HECA members have quality assurance approval under QQI and deliver QQI-validated programmes across a very diverse range of disciplines, between levels 6 and 9 on the National Framework of Qualifications. The student body within the HECA network of college providers is greater than 27,000. This project was overseen and supported by a steering group composed of the Executive Director of HECA, the HECA National Forum Teaching and Learning Representative and the Chair of HECA’s Academic Quality Enhancement Forum (HAQEF).



Photos above from the launch of the Next Steps report: (clockwise from top left): Ruth Ní Bheoláin, Chair of HAQEF (left); Patricia O'Sullivan, Executive Director of HECA (middle) and Orla Butler, Lead Research for HECA Next Steps Report (right); Simon Harris TD, Ireland's Minister for Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science officially launching the Next Steps report; Panel discussion during launch



Former Director of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching in Learning in Higher Education Dr Terry Maguire (centre) and colleagues

1.2 Research Aim

The aim of this research is to identify the Teaching Learning and Assessment (TLA) practices selected and applied during emergency remote learning in COVID-19 and to ascertain how these were experienced by educators and students in HECA Colleges. The term “educators”, as used here, is defined as all who teach and all who support learning and teaching in the Irish higher education, as identified within the *National professional development framework for all staff who teach in higher education* (National Forum for Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2016), for example, lecturers, tutors, librarians, learning technologists, education developers, instructional designers.

To identify the TLA practices utilised during COVID-19, how these changed in relation to previous practices, and what innovations have occurred, the following research questions were explored:

- i. What were educators’ experiences of delivering these TLA practices?
- ii. What were students’ experiences of these TLA practices?
- iii. What were student support staffs’ experiences of these TLA practices?

This publication provides a snapshot of insights from educators and students teaching, learning and supporting learning in HECA colleges during the COVID-19 pandemic. These insights are contextualised within the academic literature to help take stock of TLA practices utilised during the pandemic and to identify innovations that could be developed as part of a reconceptualised teaching and learning landscape of the future. This document will therefore provide:

1. An overview of literature relevant to the findings of this research.
- ii. An overview of the method and research design engaged.
- iii. Thematically analysed findings.
- iv. A discussion of those findings, arising recommendations and conclusions.



2 | Literature Review

The scope of this literature review includes emerging evidence surrounding higher education teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior literature is also included to identify pre-existing insights and possibilities for further research, and to expand upon or ask new questions within this research. The themes explored in this literature review include the changing role and identity of the educator in online learning, accessibility and digital divides, online communities of practice, inclusive teaching strategies, online assessments, and academic integrity. These themes support the primary data findings and resulting synthesis of this data, as part of this research.

2.1 Adaptability

Adaptability is cited as a key characteristic for higher education institutions (HEIs) in lessons learned (QQI, 2020, p. 157). This observation is focused on whole-institution approaches to organisational resilience defined as “the ability of an organization to anticipate, prepare for, respond and adapt to incremental change and sudden disruptions in order to survive and prosper” (Denyer, 2017, p.1).

Insights from psychological research can add further clarity, addressing the concept of adaptability at a more granular level for individual staff and students and within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Adaptability as an individual trait, is defined as “appropriate cognitive, behavioural, and/or affective adjustment in the face of uncertainty and novelty” (Martin et al., 2013, p. 2). Change management was experienced in the context of contingency planning by all members of the education community, as educators flexed and adapted their pedagogies. Lewin’s (1958) model of change management refers to a three-phased process: “unfreeze, change and freeze”. The pandemic

caused HEIs to “unfreeze” their existing behaviours and “change” their practices. Now, decisions must be made on what behaviours should remain beyond this period and how they can be “frozen”.

The reflections and evaluations of Lewin’s approach could be useful in informing post-pandemic teaching and learning practices. The post-pandemic mindset and culture in the Irish higher education sector should therefore be influenced by recent lessons learned in the efforts to support dynamic change, and to respond rapidly to environmental stimuli or external shocks to the education system.

Nandy et al. (2021) recommend the application of an all-inclusive resilience model at the beginning of the COVID-19 recovery period, to withstand the shock of the pandemic, illustrating how HEIs can apply an antifragile model to advance and improve the experience for all staff and students. In an antifragile state, HEIs return stronger, with lessons learned and reflected upon, following the experience of shocks and disruptions.



2.2 Teaching and Online Presence during the COVID-19 pandemic

Transforming the educator as an online presence calls for a review of the very idea of “presence” in the online world. Actualising the offline body in an online setting raises questions around the duality of an educator’s identity with consideration of an online identity needed to support pedagogical methods in an authentic manner (Bolldén, 2014). The online identity of educators, their sense of self, and the professional objectives they seek to communicate to the world become real and tangible factors in the learning environment.

Learning as a cognitively driven process is historically supported (Piaget, 1971; Shuell, 1986; Smith *et al.*, 1995). Knowledge construction as a social activity in the educational process is also widely accepted (Bruner, 1977; Carlisle and Jordan, 2005; Johnson *et al.*, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978). More recently, literature is expanding on how these processes are managed online. Teaching in a technologically literate culture calls for renewed approaches, as the rapid dissemination and consumption of digital media technologies permeate the education landscape.

Prensky (2001) refers to an evolution of “digital native” student identity: students who grew up with technology and who have a set of expectations that require technology to be used to enhance a learning experience. This is usually facilitated by an older, less digitally entwined teacher, termed a “digital immigrant”. Digital immigrants must accept that digital natives learn differently from previous historical cohorts, in that they “think and process information fundamentally differently” (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). Although these foundational expectations may be different, educators must also avoid the pitfall of assuming that students already possess the appropriate digital skills and literacy for academic purposes that still need to be properly taught and learned before they can be applied (Kirschner and De Bruyckere, 2017). Transforming the educator as an online presence calls for a review of the very idea of “presence” in the online world. Actualising the offline body in an online setting raises

questions around the duality of an educator’s identity with consideration of an online identity needed to support pedagogical methods in an authentic manner (Bolldén, 2014). The online identity of educators, their sense of self and the professional objectives they seek to communicate to the world become real and tangible factors in the learning environment.

Equally, conscientious educators must develop strategies and techniques that increase students’ feelings of connectedness and community when teaching online (Cleary, 2021), developing the conditions for a Community of Inquiry (COI). The COI model describes how learning takes place for a group of individual students through the educational experience that occurs at the intersection of social, cognitive and teaching presence (Garrison *et al.*, 2000). Social presence accounts for the ability of participants to project their individual personalities in order to identify and communicate with the community and develop interpersonal relationships. Cognitive presence is the extent to which students are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse. Teaching presence is the design, facilitation, and direction of the social and cognitive processes for the purpose of realising the relevant learning outcomes (Garrison *et al.*, 2000).

Promoting and maintaining a social presence online by encouraging students to get to know their lecturer as a person is an important feature of successful online learning. Opportunities for this social interaction to take place must be included in the design of the overall learning experience, for example, the creation of introductory videos and the inclusion of icebreakers (Farrell *et al.*, 2021). In terms of teaching presence, emergency remote teaching disrupted the learning environment, with many educators selecting and applying tried-and-tested teaching strategies for online delivery. The **flipped classroom** is one example of a popular instructional strategy used during the delivery of online and remote learning experiences in HECA colleges.

2.3 Digital Literacy and the Digital Divide

The digital divide among the student population also serves as a cold reminder that just because learning is placed online with an “anywhere, anytime” tagline, this does not mean the same thing to all students. There are a number of contextual factors that determine the accessibility of online learning for students, including socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, disability and housing stability (Francis and Weller, 2021), or intersections of one or more characteristics of disadvantage. The Minister for Higher Education, Simon Harris, noted a significant digital divide emerging among the Irish further and higher education student population during the COVID-19 pandemic (DFHERIS, 2020). Additionally, digital literacy skills among higher education students and staff vary. The *European digital competence framework for citizens (2.0)* defines digital or data literacy as an individual’s ability “to articulate information needs, to locate and retrieve digital data, information and content. To judge the relevance of the source and its content. To store, manage, and organise digital data, information and content” (Vuorikari, 2016, p.8).

The Irish Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning (EDTL) project, funded through the HEA Innovation and Transformation Programme 2019–2021, enhances the digital attributes and educational experiences of Irish university students by focusing on the professional development of educators. Informed by the *European Framework for the Digital Competency of Educators* (Punie and Redecker, 2017), a pedagogy-first model is used, with technology viewed as playing a supporting, rather than driving role, in the teaching and learning process. This model was recently applied to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It offered considerations for those who were adapting a module or programme for effective remote teaching; and Irish educators were asked to reflect on their digital skills and confidence during emergency remote teaching, taking stock of lessons learned, competences earned, and areas for enhancement (Flynn and Lowney, 2020).

Echoing the pedagogy-first approach, QQI (2020, 160) noted that Irish lecturing staff reported that training was technology-focused and not curriculum-focused, during the early stages of the pandemic, highlighting the need for connected conversations when switching or adapting to online teaching and learning.

2.4 Inclusivity in the Flipped Classroom

The flipped classroom is not rooted in a particular ideological approach and, as such, definitions of the flipped classroom vary in the literature (Günbatır, 2021). The Flipped Learning Network (FLN) (2015) advises that, in order to design a successful flipped learning experience, educators must provide flexible learning environments that allow students to choose when and where they learn. The focus is shifted from the educator to a student-centred approach, as materials are chosen based on their suitability for independent study (generally material is posted online, allowing students the freedom to access and digest at their own pace) and collaborative, active learning experiences, typically dynamic in-class workshops that offer students the opportunity to collectively construct new knowledge and generate meaning.

Students’ evaluation of the flipped classroom is reportedly very positive, across a wide range of disciplines (Karabulut-İlgu *et al.*, 2018; Price and Walker, 2019), with high student satisfaction being a dominant theme (Fisher *et al.*, 2021). The flipped classroom can

also influence the empowerment of students to take more personal responsibility for their own learning (O’Flaherty and Phillips, 2015). Flipped classrooms are also considered an inclusive teaching practice. An indicative example of this is the way in which students with disabilities (and by extension, all students) can access material online, manipulate this material to suit their own learning needs, and complete learning tasks in their own time.

However, accessibility is not a guaranteed outcome of the flipped classroom, as educators must continuously audit their teaching practice to ensure that all aspects of the learning goals and activities are planned, using an inclusive lens. Designing engaging teaching strategies results from the greater need to design curricula that are flexible and responsive to students’ needs. This is a particularly acute priority, post-2020. Blended and remote learning delivery modes are key characteristics of the post-pandemic learning landscape.



2.5 Universal Design for Learning

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) model, with foundations in cognitive neuroscience research, promotes the enhancement of the educational experience of students by introducing more flexible methods of teaching and assessment to cater for the diversity of students in contemporary classrooms (Rose and Meyer, 2002). As a guiding framework, UDL can easily be applied to all aspects of instruction, including teaching techniques, curricula and assessment, making this an appealing approach for educators, learning designers and staff who support student learning. This framework also advances the agenda of inclusion,

particularly for students with disabilities, who require disabling environmental factors or barriers to be addressed in the learning environment, in order to participate fully and succeed (AHEAD, 2021).

The provision of flexible learning materials in a blended/online environment places more emphasis on the student to manage and independently undertake learning activities. Consequently, this can place greater demands on students' abilities to regulate their learning.

2.6 Online Communities of Practice for Educators

Yang *et al.* (2020) describe the experience of setting up a virtual community of practice (VCoP) initiative at an Irish university during the pandemic. The mutual engagement of faculty members to support each other online was reported as very successful and was necessitated, in a large part, by "a critical skills gap in higher education, with many faculty members unfamiliar with the technical and social aspects of teaching remotely" (2020, p. 2). This shifting of collegiate behaviours and actions of higher education staff to the online realm stimulated a rapid change in cultural practice. Online communities were formed to replace traditional interactions of support. The development of these social and professional online networks potentially countered the social isolation experienced, as many staff members worked remotely. In some cases, this led to increased collaborative opportunities between colleagues. "Due to their online format, VCoPs foster interdisciplinary dialogue

even more so than face-to-face CoPs, as participants are participating from a 'safe space' home or office environment rather than in person, and hence may feel less intimidated" (Yang *et al.*, 2020, p. 6).

Rooted in studies of cyberculture, Howard Rheingold (2000, p. 5) defines a virtual community as: "Social aggregations that emerge from the [Internet] when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace". Rheingold promotes online communities as transcending the limitations experienced by individuals offline, for example, a shyness or reticence to communicate face to face. The physical and social limitations placed upon staff and students during emergency remote teaching resulted in new ways, or a deeper embedding of, existing practice to communicate and collaborate online.

2.7 The Student Experience of Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Prior to the arrival of the pandemic, Irish higher education students signalled a strong desire to interact with digital technologies in their learning with co-creative digital pedagogies highly valued (INDEX survey, 2020). The co-creation of pedagogies, including assessment and other curricular decisions, enhances student engagement and partnership, echoed in the Steps to Partnership Framework (NStEP, 2021). Promoting a culture of meaningful student engagement empowers students to harness their own perspectives and to become partners in decision-making within the learning community (NStEP, 2021).

Amplifying the student voice is crucial, particularly in times of significant change. However, simply *listening* to students is not enough however, as partnership involves a deeper framework of dialogue. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed cracks that were known to exist in terms of access to higher education for

underrepresented groups, including students with disabilities and those from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Students traditionally not considered as vulnerable were also at risk of falling into gaps of disadvantage due to lack of access to learning environments, calling for a review of the *National Access Plan* (HEA, 2018) to move towards a more human-rights-based model (Cardiff and Kehoe, 2020). Lack of opportunities to interact with peers outside the virtual class setting became another significant risk factor during the early stages of the pandemic, with the immediate switch to remote learning. Tinto's (1993) integration model views the social fabric of college life as being vital to supporting students' integration and success in higher education. The emergency response teaching removed many of the conventional opportunities for students' social interaction.

2.8 Building Communities for Future Higher Education Students

Evidence is emerging of the cruciality of online peer networks for students learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Literat (2021) reviews the influence of the mobile application TikTok with younger students, calling for HEIs to tune into youth perspectives in order to craft more equitable and empowering educational futures. Perceptions of social presence and sense of community in online learning environments influence students' participation in online learning (Cheung *et al.*, 2008). In order to keep students motivated, the idea of community becomes both a social and pedagogical construct. Therefore, creating a sense of community must be considered by educators as an enabling condition of success for students. Those who work in higher education must also understand online platforms as vital spaces for youth expression and sociality (Boyd, 2014). Educators must set the tone (create the community) within which students can feel free and empowered to express themselves.

Contemporary students appear comfortable using mobile technologies to facilitate their own peer support networks, a prime example being the popularity of the WhatsApp instant messaging application. Barhoumi (2015) explores the potential of integrating learning activities within WhatsApp mobile networks, to increase motivation, participation and success for students by promoting cooperative learning in a collaborative space. Among the benefits reported by the cohort examined in Barhoumi's research was the instant access to learning materials and the promotion of discussion between students on topics related to their learning. WhatsApp learning technologies also supports students to integrate videos, podcasts, messages, texts, images and audio files in the blended mobile learning process, adding further layers to the ways in which they receive, share and create new knowledge. The low cost and ease of access to these mobile technologies are also attractive features for education institutions (Strijbos and Fischer 2007, as cited in Barhoumi, 2015).

2.9 Self-regulation of Learning (SRL)

The higher education students of 2021 carry a unique identity, in that they are likely to have spent the majority, if not all of their studies remotely. With online learning predominant, and the lack of physical access to campus during emergency remote teaching, most of the regulatory responsibility of learning shifted onto students themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to maintain a passion and enthusiasm for their learning, HEIs must provide their students with the necessary tools to support engagement (Kahu, 2013). Students must also take ownership of their learning to further fuel and maintain engagement with their academic goals. Self-regulation of learning is fast becoming a critical skill for students to develop over the duration of their studies (Zimmerman, 1986; Zimmerman and Schunk, 2011). Learning roadmaps (Bryson and Andres, 2020) are useful tools in

supporting the journey through self-regulated learning.

The OECD (2019, P.1) highlights the importance of student agency as the capacity to set a goal, reflect, and act responsibly to effect change. “It is about acting rather than being acted upon; shaping rather than being shaped; and making responsible decisions and choices rather than accepting those determined by others”. Structural-agentic processes are not new concepts (Giddens, 1984,) but a shared understanding of student agency and autonomy in the context of learning in higher education is a more recent adaptation, given that the students-as-partners agenda is now planted firmly in institutional strategic aims. A recent literature review indicates that student partnership in the TLA environment can contribute to students’ feelings of ownership and agency in the learning environment (Ní Bheoláin *et al.*, 2019).

2.10 Implications of Remote Learning on Assessment during COVID-19

Alternative assessments involve changing or tweaking from the intended assessment strategies outlined as part of the original programme design process. Summative assessments, particularly online examinations, underwent the biggest shift during the early stages of the pandemic, igniting a conversation that is still continuing, at the time of writing. Ashri and Sahoo (2021) offer the recent experiences at an Indian university with Open Book Examinations (OBEs) as a pandemic-driven “panacea” choice of assessment, citing the lack of familiarity to OBEs themselves as a significant challenge for both staff and students. Offering students an experience to engage in higher-order thinking skills is viewed as a benefit of OBEs, but the authors caution that their success very much depends on the suitability of the discipline to this assessment method.

Authentic assessment is now an accepted practice in the landscape of Irish higher education, as students are empowered and engaged through assessments carefully designed by their programme teams (National Forum, 2017). Gulikers *et al.* (2004, p. 69) define authentic assessment as “an assessment requiring students to use the same competencies,

or combinations of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that they need to apply in the criterion situation in professional life”. The centrality of *real-world* scenarios is highly valued as part of the overall learning journey, as students assign their academic outputs with values that they perceive to be relevant to their personal development and emerging professional identities.

Providing flexible assessments that empower students to demonstrate what they know is key to expanding both the assessment toolkit that educators can use and the repertoire of skills that students can showcase, without limitation. “Let’s be clear, inclusive assessment is not about easier assessments, its aim is to assess students equitably, and for them to achieve and demonstrate all aspects of their learning with as limited a hindrance from their personal circumstances as practical” (Kneale and Collings, 2015, p. 1). Diversity in assessment allows for students with differing learning preferences and needs to excel and also offers more opportunities for the development of students’ skills and competencies. This is also supported in the previously mentioned UDL framework.



2.11 New Challenges for Academic Integrity

Against the backdrop of a changing assessment landscape, the concept of academic integrity is undergoing a similar evolution. The International Center for Academic Integrity (ICAI) (2014, p.4) defines academic integrity as “a commitment to five fundamental values: Honesty, Trust, Fairness, Respect, and Responsibility underpinned by a sixth value, Courage which is needed to act on them even in the face of adversity”. HEIs are responding globally to safeguard academic integrity, in a landscape where threats in the form of essay mills and other commercial websites offering completed academic works are real and present dangers. Data is limited in terms of understanding how prevalent a problem this is. However, a report carried out in Swansea University suggests that as many as one in seven recent graduates may have paid someone to undertake their assignment for them, potentially representing 31 million students across the globe (Newton, 2018).

In the UK, the Quality Assurance Agency (2020, p.18) published guidelines to raise awareness among higher education staff, of the factors that contribute to students engaging with contract cheating services: “the availability and awareness of cheating services, the pressures that might tempt a student to avail themselves of these services, the attitudes to committing offences and the likelihood of being caught”.

In response to the issues emerging, Ireland enacted legislation to address this issue with the inclusion of section 43a of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) (Amendment) Act 2019, making it an offence to provide or advertise cheating services.

QQI also established a National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN) in November 2019. At the time of writing, QQI in collaboration with the NAIN are developing several enhancement tools and initiatives to help education providers to provide support for students and staff in upholding academic integrity and further fostering a culture of academic integrity in their institutions. Recent guidelines were published in September 2021, offering further information for institutions, staff and students (QQI, 2021). The Teaching Enhancement Unit at Dublin City University (Teaching Enhancement Unit, 2021) developed a suite of 12 principles to assist academics in designing assessments that promote academic integrity, including the use of marking rubrics to reward positive behaviours associated with academic integrity and building in a viva type oral questioning component to assessments.

Summary

To summarise this literature review, the following paragraphs offer some key learning points.

1

Transformations occur for students and staff when teaching and learning activities are intentionally carried out online. Teaching in a technologically literate culture calls for renewed appraisals of the approaches and strategies used to motivate students and to reassure educators that the educational process is robust, dynamic and aligned to their professional identities. Through the lens of a pedagogy-first approach, technology is viewed as playing a supporting, rather than driving role, in the teaching and learning process. Within the delivery of curricula, when teaching online, educators must also develop strategies and techniques that increase students' feelings of connectedness and community. Promoting and maintaining a social presence online is a key feature of the new teaching and learning landscape.

2

Designing engaging teaching strategies results from the greater need to design curricula that are flexible and responsive to students' needs. The UDL framework offers an accessible lens to critically examine the TLA practices across the sector.

3

Evidence is emerging of the cruciality of online peer networks for students learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to keep students motivated, the idea of community becomes both a social and a pedagogical construct. For HEIs, this requires an understanding of their students' communication platforms and preferences. In order to maintain a passion and enthusiasm for their learning, HEIs must provide their students with the necessary tools to support engagement and to self-regulate their learning. This is particularly relevant with the increase in online, self-directed learning activities.

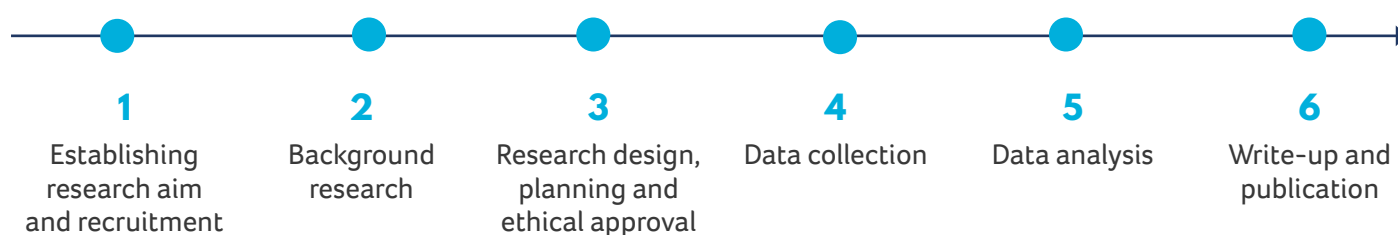
4

Diversity in assessment allows for students with differing learning preferences and needs to succeed with their learning. Authentic assessments are highly valued as part of the overall learning journey, as students assign their academic outputs with values that they perceive as relevant to their personal and professional development. Just as the current assessment landscape is undergoing some design changes, so too is the collective understanding and application of academic integrity. New literature and supporting resources are emerging to support staff and students with this task.



3 | Method and Research Design

This research involved the six core phases:



These phases are broken down in more detail in Appendix 1. This method section focuses on the methods employed in conducting the research and subsequent analysis.

3.1 Research Paradigm

Chosen for its suitability to address the research questions, this qualitative research is a holistic inquiry process, based on the exploration of social and human problems and the meanings ascribed to them (Creswell, 2014). Phenomena are interpreted by the meaning that participants bring to them. The current research can be considered “insider research” and the researchers “insider researchers”, as they have *a priori* knowledge of the community and its members (Merton, 1972).

With every step taken to preserve an objective lens, as the researcher is a member of the sample population within the HECA community, there is a noted potential risk that the researcher will unconsciously influence the interviewees as a result of the observer expectancy effect (Howitt and Cramer, 2010).

3.2 Ethical and Data Protection

Ethical approval was sought and received by the Griffith College Research Ethics Committee in June 2021. All participants in this research were required to be over 18 years of age. A participant information sheet was provided, outlining the nature and intention of the research. A consent form was issued to participants, outlining their rights, including the right to withdraw their consent at any time.

As part of the data collection process, each individual zoom recording was shared with a third-party transcription service to facilitate professional transcription. This transaction was bound by a third-party data processing agreement.

All data was collected with strict adherence to GDPR principles. Personal data, including recordings of focus groups, were deleted as soon as it was transcribed. Processed data was anonymised and stored on an encrypted server. The following steps were agreed in relation to data collection:

1. To ensure that data pseudonymisation was implemented during primary data analysis.
2. To delete any identifying data after 12 months.
3. To keep anonymised data indefinitely for HECA research purposes.
4. To seek consent again after 12 months for any research applications that have not already commenced: if a journal submission is in process, consent will not be sought again, but for a new journal submission post-12-months, additional consent will be sought.

3.3 Data Collection

Focus groups were conducted online, facilitated by the lead researcher and supported by Zoom teleconferencing software. All focus groups were conducted using a password protected Zoom meeting, secured via wait room access. These focus groups were recorded, to assist with transcription and analysis. The recordings were saved locally, using a vault encrypted system to safeguard the anonymity of the participants.

Dates of occurrence of the online focus groups: June 15th, 16th, 17th, 21st and 22nd 2021.

Duration: the duration of each focus group was 110 minutes. This comprised a two-hour session, minus a 10-minute comfort break at the halfway point.

3.4 Participants

A purposive sampling strategy was employed, specifically maximum variation sampling, for the focus group element of the research, to ensure wide representation of the stakeholders across the HECA community (Patton, 2015). There are 13 colleges represented by HECA, 12 of which agreed to participate in the research. Five focus groups were conducted, on the dates listed above. A target of 65 participants was established, with two college representatives sought from the educator and student categories and one representative from the student support category.

Thanks to collaborative efforts across 12 of the 13 HECA colleges, and the appointment of a Next Steps champion to mobilise students and staff within each college, 43 participants participated across the 5 focus groups, as outlined in the Table 1, below.

Table 1: Table Showing the number of participants across each of the five focus group meetings

Cohort	No. of participants attended
Educator Group 1	9 participants
Educator Group 2	10 participants
Student Group 1	7 participants
Student Group 2	7 participants
Student Support Staff	10 participants

In addition to these focus groups, a data insights workshop was held with the Higher Education Colleges Association Academic Quality Enhancement Forum (HAQEF), in September 2021. This exercise served as an additional exploration of the data through a facilitated discussion on the key strands identified.

3.5 Structure of Focus Groups

The aim of each focus group was to identify the TLA practices selected and applied during emergency remote learning in COVID-19, and how these were experienced by educators, students and support staff in HECA colleges.

Each of the focus groups was structured with a *start, stop, continue* line of inquiry and questioning. This was chosen for two reasons.

1. To complement and support the National Forum's chosen *What? So what? Now what?* framework for the overall Next Steps research project.
2. To enable participants to utilise retrospective and forward-looking lenses to provide insights to the broad range of TLA practices across the HECA colleges

Six questions were presented to each group (see Appendix 2). Participants were encouraged to build on these questions by offering their own insights, articulated using their own language in a free-flowing manner.

3.6 Data Analysis

Each individual transcript was systematically coded to identify themes and patterns in the data to conduct a thematic analysis, using the seven-step framework informed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method involves seven steps: transcription, reading and familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finalising the analysis.



4 | Findings

The following section provides an overview of the findings resulting from the thematic analysis of the focus group data. Themes from the focus group findings and literature review were aligned to the original research question.

This data was critically analysed noting any validation of theories, as well as any surprises, tensions or contradictions in relation to the literature. Connections between emergent themes from the findings and the prior literature were strong, particularly in the area of inclusion, the development of the UDL model, and the barriers that staff and students may face in respect of their digital skills. Creating a sense of community online, the professional identities of lecturers online and building a COI online resonated strongly in the findings. While these areas were supported with prior literature, in the context of the pandemic, it appears that further literature is required to address some more immediate issues for students and staff working and learning in higher education, post-2020.

A number of themes were identified, aligned with each of the original research questions. Table 2, below, illustrates a synthesis of the themes (yellow column), with the literature findings (blue column) leading to a number of observations (green column). These observations were used to inform the HAQEF data insights workshop, later in the research process.

Table 2: Table Illustrating Thematic Analysis Alignment to Literature Findings

Themes	Underpinning literature	Observation to inform the HAQEF workshop “Connected conversations”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adaptability during challenging times of change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> QQI (2020) Denyer (2017) Lewin (1958) Nandy <i>et al.</i> (2021) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The “grand challenges” What are the lessons learned in the efforts to support dynamic change and respond rapidly to environmental stimuli? Can HECA colleges build resilience to respond to future shocks in a better way? What’s needed to make this happen?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching strategies during emergency remote teaching Flipped classroom/hybrid/blended having multiple meanings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Garrison et al (2000) Günbatar (2021) O’Flaherty and Phillips (2015) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Definitions of Blended/flipped/hybrid Shared understanding of blended/hybrid/remote learning across the HECA community Building Communities of Inquiry
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students spending more time independently completing online learning tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Giddens (1984) Zimmerman et al (2011) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting student to develop self-regulation skills Promoting student agency/autonomy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching and learning in a networked culture Suitability of video conferencing software as a teaching platform Changing patterns and modes of student to educator communications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prensky (2010) Boyd (2014) Garrison et al (2000) Cheung <i>et al.</i> (2008) Barhoumi (2015) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating a sense of community online Communicating professional identities and values online Building a Community of Inquiry online Quality Assurance and Enhancement policy surrounding communication strategies with students Guidance on communicating online
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accessibility and inclusion Reasonable accommodations UDL 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rose and Meyer (2002) AHEAD (2021) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Integrating Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in teaching practice Addressing the digital divide Promoting flexible learning options with choice for students Improving the experience for students with disabilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peer support – staff and student networks of support Social importance of the college experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yang (2020) NStEP (2016) Tinto (1993) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student engagement Mechanisms for meaningful student partnership Promoting peer support networks Opportunities for students to socialise online Staff peer networks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessment practices Authentic assessment Open book exams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rose and Meyer (2002) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offering diversity in assessment Selecting and applying fit-for-purpose assessment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic integrity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> QQI (2021) Newton (2018) DCU (2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principles of academic integrity – sharing and collaboration across HECA Using the virtual learning environment (VLE) to promote and protect academic integrity



4.1 Key Findings of Focus Groups

- There is an expectation that flexible **blended learning** will remain a feature of future teaching and learning practice in HECA colleges, particularly within disciplines that contain theoretical programme content.
- The specifications and capabilities of **video conferencing software** need to be critically evaluated to fully support the educational process, given its position as a dominant teaching platform.
- The **flipped classroom** is considered the most successful blended learning model for the delivery of theoretical modules and programme content, with staff and students favouring this approach.
- **Practical modules** are complex and challenging to deliver online during emergency remote teaching.
- Hybrid and blended teaching have changed the **communication patterns and modes between educators and students**. This calls for an examination of supporting policies and practices at institutional and programme level.
- Students place a very strong value on **peer support networks**. Technology facilitates the quick mobilisation of these networks and, once they have been established, they tend to remain for the duration of the students' studies
- Educators welcome any additional **wellbeing supports** to address the mental and physical tolls experienced as a result of a shift in their own work patterns and practices. Equal empathy was shared for their students displaying fatigue/burnout due to arduous online learning schedules during emergency remote teaching.
- Significant efforts were made by HECA colleges and individual educators to uphold the **integrity** of programme assessment strategies during emergency remote teaching.
- **Authentic assessments** have strong buy-in and are valued as part of the overall learning journey, as students assign their academic outputs with values that they perceive as relevant to their personal development and emerging professional identities.
- **Students' preparedness to work remotely** in a professional setting is considered an emerging competency. This should be considered by programme teams when developing future learning outcomes/graduate attributes.
- **OBEs** reduced, or in some cases, negated the provision of reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. This was viewed as a welcome and timely change to the assessment landscape.
- Driven by technological innovations and reflecting the values of **UDL**, HECA educators are keen to provide further elements of choice and variety when assessing their students.
- Staff training and **continuous professional development** is critical for the success of future blended and hybrid teaching. Continuous professional development for HECA educators should also include an exploration of the changing role of the lecturer in the post-COVID landscape.
- Every effort should be made to identify and address **digital divides** present among staff and students. Digital skills and digital confidence have increased strategic importance.

The following section presents a more detailed discussion of the focus group findings.



What Teaching and Learning Practices and Innovations occurred?

4.2 What Teaching and Learning Practices and Innovations occurred?

The latter half of the academic year 2019/20 transformed the teaching and learning landscape, as HECA educators responded to the call for immediate online teaching. For many colleges, the initial effort focused on the delivery of programmes and modules in an online setting and the provision of alternative assessments. The 2020/21 academic year allowed for some face-to-face elements to resume, albeit short lived. This called for a hybrid model approach, with staff and students once again transforming their teaching and learning practices, before reverting to full online delivery, as per the prevailing public health guidance.

Reflective of the diversity of programme offerings across HECA colleges, a wide range of technologically supported practices were implemented during the emergency remote teaching period. Some colleges had stronger existing infrastructure to manage the transition, with other colleges needing to source and implement additional resources. The experiences of educators depended on their prior experience with online teaching.

“ I was very sceptical about it, but for me the brand-new thing was delivering anything online, because we did everything in person. We had done very preliminary preparations for an online course prior to the pandemic. But then once the pandemic happened, it was jumping in and doing it.”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 1)

“ We had been doing online learning for a couple of the years. We were lucky in that respect; it wasn't a big switch: it just meant more of the same.”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 4)

The predominant shift in most colleges occurred with the transition to video conferencing software to support remote teaching. Examples of the software used are Zoom, Microsoft teams and YouTube live. Practical programmes that required more tangible outputs from students adopted and further adapted new technologies to support the successful delivery of their programmes.

Academic programme teams collaborated with information technology support, learning technologists and learning designers to create the best possible learning experiences for their students. Examples of the resulting teaching innovations are the use of H5P, digital whiteboards, document visualisers and various other discipline-specific software programmes.

Among the teaching practices adopted, the most commonly reported was the provision of asynchronous lectures and content delivery, paired with opportunities for deeper learning in synchronous online classes using a flipped classroom method, aided by breakout rooms and other engagement tools. This was considered the most successful model for the delivery of theoretical modules and programme content, with HECA staff and students favouring this approach. The biggest challenge arose for more practical modules, where students and staff reported challenges regarding how this teaching was delivered and how it was received, particularly during the early stages of the pandemic.

The recording of lectures was cited as one of the biggest wins for students during emergency remote teaching. Some educators cited some concerns about the continuation of recording all lectures, and its potential impact on student attendance and engagement, with staff from one HECA college reporting that lectures were not recorded. However, most staff felt that recording lectures would become a feature of the future teaching and learning environments.

“ I definitely think that recordings are a hot topic in our institution at the moment, whether we should keep them or not; or at one end of the spectrum, some members of staff perhaps think, well, that was the emergency period: we are going to go back to 2019 when everything was beautiful, and we were dancing around the meadows. But the genie is out of the bottle now with regard to all of this, I think.”
(Student Support Group, Participant 4)

Virtual learning environments (VLEs) were relied upon to manage a lot of programme materials. Certain educators needed to widen their skills base and increase their use of some of the functionality in their VLE. Learning technologists and digital support departments played a crucial role to bridge gaps in knowledge and skill levels among teaching staff. As much of this activity happened in real time, during an unfolding pandemic, educators adopted an agile approach to trialling new digital resources and software. In the medium to long term, there is a need to provide training opportunities which will empower educators to produce online teaching materials that make the best use of the technology available.

“ I think there need to be more professional development opportunities whether it's micro credentials or short courses or upskilling in a peer support manner.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 5)

4.2 What Teaching and Learning Practices and Innovations occurred?

“ We needed to train staff and become better at creating good asynchronous pieces. We do have instructional designers, but we wouldn't have enough instructional designers to work all the time. It's a big CPD area for staff to get them confident enough to produce good-quality pieces of asynchronous and make them movable objects.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 2)

It was noted that much of the video conferencing software used to support teaching was not originally designed as educational software and, as such, did not fully meet some requirements for educators. Some teaching styles and associated activities could not be supported by the software used. It was felt that the software should adapt to the teaching and not the other way around. The specifications and capabilities of video conferencing software need to be critically evaluated, to fully support the educational process.

“ If online learning, I think, is here to stay, and I think that's a good thing because overall I have had a positive experience of it; but the software needs to adapt to us, and I think that's a conversation that needs to happen. I know some colleges use Teams and some use Zoom. We were told the Taoiseach said colleges are closing, and you have got one week to get on Zoom. But Zoom itself, I think, holds back the educational process. We are going to have to use this technology, but I think we are going to have to [give] feedback to this software.”
(Educator Group 1, participant 1)

To counteract some of the drawbacks of the video conferencing software, educators often used multiple external tools to support their teaching.

“ We have a matrix of technologies of just over 300 pieces of technologies from Mentimeter for engagement, from paddle board for collaboration, to TeamLink for dynamic content, Kahoot! quizzes, quizzes for gamification, and game-based learning opportunities.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 5)

All participating HECA educators and student support staff shared a strong commitment to continuously improving the learning experience for their students. The perception among educators is that the future of online teaching will be shaped by the continued development of student engagement and collaboration, by creating dynamic content that caters to diverse student groups. Additionally, leveraging VLEs to develop structured opportunities for students to self-direct their own learning is considered an emerging dominant feature. It was felt that curricula must be designed with this in mind.

“ We were constantly looking at how [we could] make this better.”
(Educator Focus Group 1, Participant 5)

“ This whole experience has really made me reflect and say there [are] better ways out there [by which] we can assess students.”
(Educator Focus Group 1, Participant 8)

The transformation of assessment practices, centred around the provision of alternative assessments, with the transition to OBEs, was the biggest reported change to practice. Other assessment tools utilised include multiple choice questionnaires, VLE quizzes, and the creation of negotiated student self-assessment rubrics.

Proctored online examinations reportedly came with logistical challenges and potential issues were highlighted regarding their continued use in some colleges.

“ Proctored online examination is hugely problematic, to find a means of doing that traditional form of examination is really, really challenging. And it's one of the things ... from a pedagogical perspective, is that online is going to pose a major question: Do we need that form of assessment particularly in the humanities and applied sciences? Is it valuable? If we don't do it, are we losing out on a particular form of assessment of learning?”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 4)

There is an appetite among students and educators to keep the conversation going and to make longer-term enhancements to assessment practices.

“*There [are] so many different ways to assess students out there, and my mind, I know, has been broadened completely by the pandemic. So, the different assessments that I have used, it's really when I guess things go back to the new normal or back to the way they were, I want to bring what's really worked over this course [so] that I don't just throw everything out and say all right back to normal, let's get the exams, 50 percent exams. It's actually like no, actually hold on a second, there is a much better way to run this particular module.*”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 8)

There is a preference for the continued development of authentic assessments, with students assigning their academic outputs with values that they perceive as relevant to their personal development and emerging professional identities.

“*It's not just examining your knowledge of the course, but can you take that further because that's the whole process of learning, isn't it? That you don't just learn the standard stuff: you learn how to take the standard stuff and fly with it.*”
(Student Group 1, Participant 8)

Thoughts on the future teaching and learning landscape all leaned towards some form of conversation happening at college/programme level, to agree the best way to deliver, influenced by the practices adopted during emergency remote teaching and lessons learned from this overall experience.

“*When you are designing new programmes now, we can look at it and say, 'Hold on, what kind of programme are we designing? Is this going to be blended? How can we get the best of these different worlds?'*”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 8)

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark sleeveless top, stands in a meeting room, gesturing with her hands as if presenting. In the foreground, the backs of two people's heads are visible; one has long braids and the other has curly hair. They are seated at a table, looking towards the presenter. The room has a large screen in the background and a geometric pattern overlay on the entire image.

What were HECA Educators' Experiences?

4.3 What were HECA Educators' Experiences?

4.3.1 Teaching and Learning Practices

Hybrid teaching invoked multiple discussions, with some educators reporting mixed success with this model. In terms of future planning, hybrid delivery comes with considerable concerns and a cautionary pause is required to consider the implications of embedding a hybrid model in the medium to long term. It should also be noted that the term “hybrid” was sometimes interchanged with “blended”, suggesting a lack of distinction/definition between the two models.

“It was a bit tricky, the hybrid situation, because when I am fully online, everyone is online, and I can take questions. In the hybrid scenario, there was a split of physical students in the room, and then students online and you have to devote attention to both.”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 1)

“We don't know how it's going to pan out, but certainly it will take a while, I think, for the whole flexible hybrid, blended, multimodal ... all those words I think for lecturers [are] quite overwhelming and I think definitely [there needs to be] a lot more support in that area for lecturers. The consideration of what they are having to do has to be better than maybe it is at the moment.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 2)

“It's working out a hybrid scenario [that] is going to be the biggest challenge. I am not sure that remote teaching is going to end, is my honest answer to that question.”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 6)

Some colleges provided additional resources to support hybrid teaching and reported successful collaboration between teaching staff and online support staff in enhancing the learning experience for students.

“The other thing we dabbled in was the use of moderators, that lecturers would have moderators; and we tried to put in a training for moderators; and it helped [to] ease the workload during live classes.”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 7)

Overall, both educator groups felt that online teaching would remain a feature of their future practice, and had the potential to be successfully developed, particularly within disciplines that contain more theoretical programme content.

The **flipped classroom** was reported as a very successful teaching approach, utilised by the majority of participants.

“We would prerecord a lot of the theory content behind the module and use the class time to be almost entirely practical. So, I work in IT, so we [did] tonnes of coding, lots of white board work, very [few] slides; that was something quite new when the pandemic started.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 2)

“There was no way we'd have got through the curriculum that I had to teach in the environment I was in, if I hadn't flipped, used that flipped classroom method.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 8)

It was acknowledged that the flipped classroom approach placed more emphasis on students independently completing online learning tasks.

“The big challenge there, of course, is to get the students to do the work from an asynchronous perspective; to get the students motivated to do that work in their own time and bring that work to the classroom.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 7)

Due to the responsive nature of the quick transition to online teaching, students' timetables were noted as not being conducive to support a blended approach. It is expected that a redesign of students' timetables will be facilitated to include structured online activities along with synchronous online classes, in the next academic year.

“I think one of the things, as well, that really struck me was, I think the colleges will have to rethink the amount of time that students are engaged on online activity. I think the types of timetables, long extended timetables, [are] probably not as viable or feasible in that context. And so, another thing that really struck me was screen time. We would have lectures starting at 6 and they finished about 9.30, and what really struck me about that was a lot of the students were coming, having spent the whole day on Zoom themselves in their workplace.”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 4)

4.3 What were HECA Educators' Experiences?

Concerns about excessive periods of time spent online/ on screens were raised across the two educator groups. **Zoom fatigue** is a clearly identified phenomenon, with educators describing the mental and physical tolls experienced, due to a shift in their own work patterns and practices. Equal empathy was shared for their students displaying fatigue/burnout due to arduous online learning schedules. There was a sense that future learning activities should be structured to allow students more time to receive and digest learning material.

Training and continuous professional development was raised as an important area for the future development of blended and hybrid teaching. It was noted that colleges had placed emphasis and associated resources on training in data protection (pre-pandemic) and similar energy and efforts should now support teaching and learning initiatives. When COVID-19 arrived, most colleges provided guidance and support on teaching and learning or pedagogical matters, with learning technologists offering supports on technical matters. It was noted that teaching staff had varying degrees of technical competency and that this inconsistency was challenging in terms of the overall student experience, at programme level.

“ We found that a lot – that we had one lecturer [who] was doing amazing stuff with Teams, stuff we hadn't even trained them in, and a few extra miles, and then we had other lecturers [who] were just trying to get the hang of it; and I think the disparity between the two different experiences was a little jarring for the students.”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 2)

“ I think there need to be more professional development opportunities, whether it's micro credentials or short courses or upskilling in a peer support manner. I think there needs to be more of that, because what we have seen is technology is not going away.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 5)

There was a significant **increase in administrative workload** reported for educators during emergency remote teaching. This was primarily driven by redesigning assessments and an increased level of individual correspondence with students. Most educators reported that student-to-educator email communications increased exponentially. This raised questions surrounding the expectations of students interacting with educators in a fully online environment.

“ For me, I found a lot of the students [whom] I had seen face to face on campus [who] were normally very quiet and shy, and probably wouldn't say anything to you, were now interacting a lot more, whether that be through the chat or through the other platforms and tools that we had. And of course, the email was constant: it was a constant flow of email and trying to manage that.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 3)

“ I am not sure about anybody else, but we found our connection with students has just been a huge amount of extra work in terms of making that connection and perhaps even getting messages outside of ... office hours. We had a huge amount of extra work and responsibility.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 5)

It was noted that communication modes between educators and students and within staff peer groups moved online and this resulted in a cultural shift in communicative practices. The blurring of boundaries between formal and informal communication was noticeable with student-to-educator communications.

“ It did of course increase the workload of faculty members, perhaps in a very constructive way for the students, though, because now they had a new outlet, new avenues to interact with staff.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 2)

“ I found I was getting ... every time I was asking questions in class, [are] there any questions on that? Well then sometimes the day after, the following day, I would have a surge of emails, and it was this big backlog of administration work in between classes.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 8)

4.3 What were HECA Educators' Experiences?

Student peer networks were mentioned as being culturally significant, with a "WhatsApp group" phenomenon noted as a defining characteristic of the changing communication preferences among students. It was felt that some students looked to their peer networks for formal programme information, and this raised concerns around misinformation and the blurring of formal/informal communications between students and staff.

“*The WhatsApp gathered legs and it was ... everybody believed what everybody said on WhatsApp.*”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 3)

“*WhatsApp, at the end of the day, is the equivalent of passing notes. That's essentially what it is.*”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 4)

It was felt that an examination of supporting communication policies and practices at institutional and programme level was needed, to take into account the shifting patterns of online communication and informal peer networks.

“*Aside from the teaching as well, every morning when I open up my email, I have got a backlog of emails to get through with various different issues. And at the moment there is very little support for that because it's just a case of you have to deal with it, so I would be interested in support procedures being set up to help us deal with communication in an online world.*”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 1)

Peer communications are equally important for educators. Ways to promote and maintain communities of practice and peer sharing in novel ways, using supporting technologies [were] mentioned as an interesting area for future development.

“*The informal peer learning: I think we underestimated just how much sitting in the canteen and having a cup of coffee and hearing what people are talking about, for a new member of staff or for anybody really, really helps.*”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 2)

4.3.2 Assessment Practices

Alternative assessment arrangements were undertaken by almost all educators at programme level. Other arrangements were agreed at college level, including online proctored examinations and OBEs. One college reported the replacement of a master's thesis with an integrated literature review, to facilitate students in successfully achieving their learning outcomes and complete their programme.

Significant efforts were made by colleges and individual educators to uphold the integrity of programme assessment strategies and to offer students alternative options and arrangements.

“*The workload on our lecturers as well went up sharply, because they had to design really complex assessment. For instance, in software development, we designed questions that were individualised down to a student number, so that there was no communication between the students.*”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 2)

Complex challenges occurred with the **assessment of professional placements**, with some educators reporting difficulties in redesigning assessments for students who could not attend their on-site placement due to public health guidelines.

“*The big one that was turned on its head for us was school placement, because tutors couldn't go into schools to visit tutors to supervise them, to observe them. We had to completely redesign it and turn it into a virtual type of thing.*”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 5)

While it was felt that in-person professional placements were preferred, the changing assessment practices and redesigns led to some interesting additional benefits in assessing students' skills in other areas that had previously been more implicit.

“*It put a huge emphasis on reflective practice, which wouldn't have been as evident previously.*”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 5)

4.3 What were HECA Educators' Experiences?

The professional placements posed interesting observations regarding **students' preparedness to work remotely** in a professional setting.

“All our students have to go out on placement, and they would generally be doing, let's say one-to-one agreement with clients and they weren't, that was all gone. And that caused a major problem. So, all of their work moved online; all the organisations started engaging with their clients online. But our students didn't have training in relation to that.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 6)

“The ability, I know this doesn't apply to everybody, but the ability to work remotely is an ability our learners are now going to have to have. I am now going to work that into my assessment strategy.”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 1)

This suggests that future curriculum learning outcomes and associated assessment strategies might need to consider students' ability to work remotely as an explicitly addressed future skill and graduate attribute.

OBes, with varying degrees of time constraints, were used in many colleges to replace traditional face-to-face examinations, requiring educators to redesign the assessment experience for their students.

“It definitely led me to design more case study or problem-solving style assessments.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 2)

It was also felt that alternative assessment arrangements advanced the **UDL** agenda by providing students with greater choice and variety to demonstrate what they knew in assessments.

“I am kind of in the camp that I felt that exams were kind of too relied upon, so I felt this whole alternative assessment was a good thing, even though it was ... obviously forced, due to the circumstances. But I actually feel it's benefited the student because there has been a lot more choice.”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 8)

Some educators reported a keenness to continue integrating choice into their assessment practices, as the benefits for their students had become more apparent. Offering flexibility, harnessing diversity, and fostering inclusion are now accepted as core characteristics of best-practice teaching for HECA educators.

“We just impose one type of assessment, and we don't say ever to the student, well, have you a preferred choice? Can you justify it?”
(Educator Group 2, participant 2)

“I think the door will be open for more opportunities of flexible, dual delivery or fully online modes and I think we need to become better at that, whether it's engagement, collaboration, assessment, creating inclusive opportunities or choice for our students.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 5)

Designing OB assessments also contributed to **authenticity in assessment** for some educators: a point that was verified in the student focus groups.

“It's been a lot more work, but I feel it's been more beneficial. It's given me a greater insight into, okay, if students are doing really well on this, they're not just rote learning off something, it's not just definitions, they can really breakdown the problem: they've got insight.”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 8)

The general consensus was that OBEs should remain a feature of the future assessment landscape for appropriate disciplines.

“I found that the grade for the OB exercises and exams really did reflect student attendance and were very indicative of the level that a student would be at. So, where I never used OBE before, I would now be much more comfortable using that again. It would be for specific modules, so I would look at it on a content basis, but I would certainly consider it now going forward.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 1)

4.3 What were HECA Educators' Experiences?

However, **Grade inflation and academic integrity** were mentioned as concerns among some educators with the continuation of OBEs.

“ I would be very concerned about that going into the future and I have experienced grade inflation a little bit in one of my modules.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 7)

“ I definitely think there is an element of grade inflation. I totally agree with that”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 2)

“ Some students thrived; others didn't in that environment. You had to take account of things like typing speed. which you probably wouldn't normally think of, when it's in its handwritten form.”
(Educator Group 2, Participant 4)

It was noted that **Academic supervision** and other one-to-one engagement flourished in an online setting. Among the reported things that worked well was the ability to schedule meetings with greater ease, share files and offer online feedback, improving the overall supervisor-to student-relationship and workflow.

“ For academic supervision, I have found it to be probably the most successful element of all of this. You can share files very, very quickly, you know that the student isn't walking away with questions in the same way that you would in the past.
(Educator Group 1, Participant 4)

Virtual office hours and online drop-in sessions were also considered to be successful additions to the learning landscape.

“ We experimented with virtual office hours, so I would say to the students, 'Hey I will be available on a Wednesday or a Friday at this time, 10 until 11.' And if they had any issues, they could just drop in and talk through. And that was actually ... that grew in popularity as the semester went on.”
(Educator Group 1, Participant 8)



What were HECA Students' experiences?

4.4 What were HECA Students' experiences?

4.4.1 Teaching and Learning Practices

HECA students quickly adapted to **blended and hybrid learning** environments. There is a strong preference to retain and develop both these models, although there is evidence of lack of clarity in how they are defined. The continued recording of lectures dominates the vision of how future learning environments will best suit the needs of students.

“ Having the recorded class, it's just really nice because our lectures were around two and a half hours long. So, if you can go back through them because we used to cover a lot of things in it. So, if you have the chance to go back to it, it's really great. So even if we go back to our normal classes, I would say we should record those classes.”
(Student Group 1, Participant 3)

“ I don't know how it works with the part-time courses but full-time students, we have appointments with Gardai for emigration and things, maybe we fell ill and we have to go to the GP, so in that rare scenario a recorded class can be a life-saver.”
(Student Group 1, Participant 2)

“ I think hybrid is probably going to become the new norm. Certainly, it's one of the reasons I am going to go on and do a master's [degree] in September, because I do not want to be sitting in a lecture hall for two hours.”
(Student Group 2, Participant 1)

Zoom fatigue was mentioned repeatedly as a disadvantage of remote online learning, with calls for greater consideration of this by educators.

“ Yeah, I would expect the college to understand Zoom fatigue or telecommunication fatigue a bit more. A lot of our lectures are, could be four hours long and there is not a lot of interaction between student and teacher. While I think some teachers do their best, it's just the nature of the programme as well. It just doesn't elicit as much of a reaction or response; people also are a lot more disengaged often online, due to the medium that we're using.”
(Student Group 2, Participant 1)

Some students were keen to return to **face-to-face learning**. It was felt that the social aspects of college life were seriously limited during remote learning and, for some students, a return to campus life would result in more meaningful interaction with their peers.

“ I personally feel like I don't know the people; I only know names and even at that, I couldn't put names to faces. And that's something, you know, after a year in college, you should be able to know, and you should be able to ... figure out who your friend group is.”
(Student Group 2, Participant 5)

“ I'm also looking forward to the library – access to the library and going in and meeting, really meeting people because ... there is a huge community of us, and I am dying to physically meet them.”
(Student Group 2, Participant 2)

For programmes with more practical-based learning, it was felt that physical attendance on site was the optimum way to learn.

“ Our practical workshops went online and that just doesn't work. You can't teach Olympic lifting, snatch, or anything like that virtually. You need to experience it.”
(Student Group 1, Participant 5)

“ Anything practical is really difficult. Anything academic, like lectures, is so easy to do and then you can store it and replay it; and that's lovely to have that as a library of information; but anything practical that's hands on, you have to experience it.”
(Student Group 1, Participant 4)

“ It's just not the same online.”
(Student Group 1, Participant 2)

4.4 What were HECA Educators' Experiences?

Most students felt that theoretical programme content was better suited to online or video-based material.

“ And then in terms of my course, I would actually say to ... continue to do all theory online and then for the practicals, maybe just have more, one practical every month and it's only on a Saturday or Sunday for maybe six or seven hours. And that brings it together for that month and then you move on to the next topic.”

(Student Group 2, Participant 3)

Students place a very strong value on peer support networks. Technology facilitates the quick mobilisation of these networks and once established, these networks tend to remain for the duration of their studies. All participating students indicated that they belonged to an instant messaging service that was accessed through their mobile phone.

“ So yeah, it was [WhatsApp group] definitely a more informal way of communicating but, to be honest, ... what got me through the year was having the help and the support of the other classmates.”

(Student Group 2, Participant 5)

“ The class rep set up a WhatsApp group that was really useful and that was hopping every day and every night and everyone chatting about assignments, and if you needed any advice about anything.”

(Student Group 1, Participant 1)

Virtual office hours are viewed positively by students for providing a channel of communication between students and educators, outside the classroom environment. There is also a link between this, and the issues raised in the educator focus groups around managing increased email communications. The distinction between formal communications between students and educators has softened and is now less defined, leading to a shift in expectations.

“ I think something that could be improved upon in communication would be some type of office hours: even if it is all online, office hours could be booked.”

(Student Group 2, Participant 2)

“ When you are emailing your lecturer to ask them a question, and it takes a while to actually communicate the answer and the question back and forth because it takes a week or two because there [are 10] emails back and forth or whatever, I think the Zoom could still be very helpful there, because just rather than the 10 emails over 2 weeks, just have a half an hour [of] Zoom and you are able to talk out your questions and answers way faster than any form of email.”

(Student Group 2, Participant 3)

Meetings with project supervisors and group project peers reportedly worked well online. It was noted that the elimination of travel time to college campus, for such meetings and onsite lectures afforded students with more time to dedicate to their independent study and the completion of assessments.

“ I am thinking about two years ago if there was a group assignment you would all come into the college, and you would all meet, whereas now, you don't need to do that. Or meeting perhaps with a supervisor, something along the lines of that: now it will be, 'Just jump on Zoom there for an hour and we'll have it rather than come meet me in my office.'”

(Student Group 2, Participant 3)

“ I think we got more time for study when we were at home: not travelling, not doing anything, just be[ing] at home and more time to study. I think this is something that we can take in the learning side: that we didn't have to go to the college and waste time.”

(Student Group 1, Participant 3)

“ I would say this is the first time of my entire college live where I actually sought out a book that was just related to what I was learning and read it at a leisurely pace, but I think it's because I had the time.”

(Student Group 2, Participant 2)

4.4 What were HECA Educators' Experiences?

There is a strong appetite to retain and develop the flexibility that was built into curricula and teaching strategies during emergency remote teaching. This is perceived to have far-reaching, longer-term outcomes for widening access and participation, particularly for part-time students.

“ I think for me being a mature student, a mom of two and being at home during the pandemic, I think it kind of worked out in my favour doing the remote learning. I think it got me through the course [more easily] than if I had to go in and out to college every night and juggle that with work and the kids. So, I think for me it kind of worked out in my favour.”
(Student Group 1, Participant 1)

Assessment Practices

Generally, students reported high satisfaction levels with the alternative assessment arrangements provided by HECA colleges.

Authentic assessments have strong buy-in and are valued as part of the overall learning journey, as students assign their academic outputs with values that they perceive as being relevant to their personal development and emerging professional identities. Continuous assessment was favoured over exam-based assessments.

“ To be honest, I much preferred to write assignments. I think I learned much more, so I was really happy when they changed to [that] instead of just testing my memory, because for me [a] closed-book exams is for that – just to test how much you can memorise, not what you really know about things.”
(Student group two, Participant 4)

“ That’s why I kind of like the CAs as opposed to the exams. It’s a lot more thought put into it. A lot more real-life [application] than anything else.”
(Student Group 1, Participant 2)

The majority of students preferred open-book examinations to CBEs, with the ability to undertake exams in their home environment being a pressure-alleviating factor during a usually very demanding time in their academic schedules.

“ I would say a closed book exam I ... I don’t really know the need for it. Is there a need for it in the real world? ... [Y]ou are always going to have access to your phone, like, if you are doing something in work.”
(Student Group 2, Participant 3)

“ I personally prefer OBEs. The reason why is because I personally find it really, really hard to memorise things and it takes me a long, long time to remember something.”
(Student Group 2, Participant 5)

It was noted that closed-book examinations still held validity in certain disciplines and programmes.

“ I think there is a place for traditional exams because [this system] examines much more than memory; it shows you how you can react under pressure; it shows your ability to read a question, answer exactly what you have been asked. It also eliminates plagiarism and all this stuff that you can now do so easily online.”
(Student Group 1, Participant 5)

Offering **choice and variety in assessments** was a dominant theme, reflecting the values of UDL, as also raised in the educator focus groups.

“ I also think if we’re given choice, it will help boost self-esteem because people will be choosing the assignment. They want [to] do what best suits them and when you have an assignment that suits your type of learning, it will overall just help bring up the grade; and I think a lot more people will feel that they are actually succeeding at the course and a choice in assignment would help with that.”
(Student Group 2, Participant 5)

“ I think if you give them [students] choice, it takes away the fear and that worry when you are starting this module, when you know you can take this on your own and you can do it this way or that way, and you have a couple of choices.”
(Student Group 2, Participant 1)

There is evidence of some **additional skills burden** from students completing assessments during emergency remote learning, particularly around the use of technology to demonstrate their learning.

(Student Group 2, Participant 2)



What were the experiences of HECA Student Support Staff?

4.5 What were the Experiences of HECA Student Support Staff?

4.5.1 Teaching and Learning Practices

Reaching and supporting students who are learning remotely was a key priority for HECA student support staff. A number of college support staff reported strong student engagement with instant chat messaging services.

“ I would be like just jump on chats on teams for me and if I am free, I will be happy to have a chat back, which students definitely engaged with more. It felt a bit more like a WhatsApp conversation as opposed to an email... as for some students, it [email] feels really formal.”
(Support Staff Group, Participant 2)

“ We got instant chat embedded in Moodle, which we didn't have, but we had it in admissions and in the library. So that just exploded. We had to keep buying nearly more accounts every couple of weeks. That's what students want. They just want [to] fire out a quick text and get an answer instantly. They don't ring anymore.”
(Support Staff Group, Participant 8)

“ We had been looking at some kind of instant messaging functionality for our students prior to COVID, but I think COVID proved to be a bit of a catalyst for getting that up and running.”
(Support Staff Group, Participant 9)

This reflects the shift in communication patterns highlighted in the other educator focus group and validated in the student focus groups. Concerns were raised about the blurring of formal/informal lines of communication between students and support staff, with a potential risk of misinterpreting formal colleges processes.

“ Some students would use WhatsApp, some would use email, and it would be in an informal tone, but they might be [making] a request that had to go through a formal process, like seeking an extension ... it still had to follow a particular process, and you can't send that request through the instant messaging function in Moodle to your lecturer.”
(Support Staff Group, Participant 8)

Online drop-in sessions worked well online, with most staff favouring the retainment of this model, in their future practice.

“ The informal drop-in sessions, we did them twice a week and they were quite beneficial, as well; and like others, I think we will continue doing something like that in some format after things go back to normal.”
(Support Staff Group, Participant 9)

“ The engagement was better than it's ever been face to face. We had so many more students show up and use the service, so I definitely think that's [online drop-in sessions] something we will keep”
(Support staff group, Participant 2)

“ Actually, it worked perfectly well and better than well.”
(Support Staff Group, Participant 7)

Student-led drop-in sessions, digital cafés and the creation of other online spaces were also reported as successful initiatives to enhance student communications during emergency remote teaching.

The **recording of lectures and support workshops** was noted as something that should be retained and developed in the future to support students' learning. Students with disabilities, and by extension all students, benefit from access to recordings and closed captioning. Recording support sessions also brought an element of efficiency to the creation of online reusable resources.

“ It's just that versatility that can happen with video and maybe then not kind of reinventing the wheel, not having to do it again in six months' time; it can then direct students to those resources, so you are kind of killing two birds with one stone sometimes with the recordings as well, so that's been really useful learning for us.”
(Support Staff Group, Participant 6)

4.5 What were the Experiences of HECA Student Support Staff?

“All the lectures being recorded has been massive for the students, because I work predominantly with students with disabilities ... We have been fighting to get this done for years and now COVID has made it have to happen. But I think for students ... with caring responsibilities, who are working, it's been huge for them. I think that's something that we really need to try and keep, if we can.”

(Support Staff Group, Participant 5)

Some support staff worked to enhance the digital skills of teaching staff in their colleges. It was noted that teaching staff had varying degrees of skill levels. Digital resources were created to support staff drop-in and other training sessions.

“We needed to create some very specific content for different groups, because we are not talking about same level of skills.”

(Support Staff Group, Participant 5)

Further utilising the VLE to provide a variety of engagement opportunities for students was considered a positive future development and necessary to support the viability of blended learning.

There is a strong preference for the development of video resources to support both staff and students, acknowledging the changing digital landscape and increased patterns of media consumption.

“Someone said to me at the beginning of the lockdown, if I was to look at my own Facebook, it's moving all the time. There are videos everywhere; people learn through videos more now than they did before.”

(Support Staff Group, Participant 5)

“Before we used to see Moodle as a huge support of online content, and now we really see IT as an important more strategic function. We are looking for more technology as a partner, not just as a support.”

(Support Staff Group, Participant 5)

4.5 What were the Experiences of HECA Student Support Staff?

4.5.2 Assessment Practices

OBEs reduced, or in some cases, negated the provision of reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities. This was viewed as a welcome and timely change to the assessment landscape.

“It gave that flexibility where they could take a break when they needed, come back to it when they needed. So that I would love to see [fewer] timed exams, I would love to see exams go.”
(Support staff group, Participant 5)

The viability of OBEs was considered unknown, for the medium to long term. Suitability of this assessment method was considered discipline-/subject-dependent.

“It’s a massive operational challenge, and it’s a massive teaching and learning challenge, I think as well, because [it’s difficult] to hold on to the integrity of the exam, and to get someone to demonstrate in open book format, [and] to pose the questions in a way that is adaptable to that new mode.”
(Support Staff Group, Participant 4)

“I think the OBE has a place, but I don’t know if it suits every single subject.”
(Support Staff Group, Participant 7)

Echoing the **additional skills burden** mentioned during the student focus groups, it was felt that all assessment marking schemes needed to carefully evaluate learning outcomes, rather than additional skills or technical competences that existed outside the remit of module assessments. This was particularly relevant with the shift to online learning.

“We had to be really strict on what we were assessing, and to make sure that just because somebody didn’t put together a really nice, edited video, if they still met the same learning outcomes and they still had the correct content there, that they could still receive [a] good grade.”
(Support Staff Group, Participant 1)

The **alternative assessment** of an integrated literature review to replace a thesis in one college led to an interesting observation about the resulting outcomes for students, offering an insight into the positive outcomes of alternative assessment and adding to the conversation of providing choice for future cohorts of students to allow for options in demonstrating their research.

“I suppose they had to learn this new way of doing their thesis, but at the same time they acquired much better life skills in terms of doing research and a greater appreciation of research output and understanding that and understanding the difference between quality academic material and what wouldn’t be considered to be that.”
(Support Staff Group, Participant 1)

UDL was also endorsed as a framework for supporting student success, with choice and variety of assessments welcomed.

“A couple of our lecturers ... went down the universal design route and gave students .. options on how they were going to be assessed. They could submit a video, do an assignment, they could do a timed exam; and that, for students, was amazing, to have those [options].”
(Support Staff Group, Participant 2)

“I think we need to continue to see a variety of assessment from the learners’ perspective. We really do, and the more of a variety, the better.”
(Support Staff Group, Participant 7)

Additional responses were collected from all focus group participants, relating to “big picture” questions. These responses are presented in the format of word clouds, located in Appendix 1 of this report.

5 | HAQEF Data Insights Workshop

As an additional layer to this work, allowing for further interpretation of meaning in the data collected, a data insights workshop with HAQEF took place on 9 September 2021. The overarching purpose of the HAQEF is to carry out the strategic objectives set by the HECA Board, representing HECA's commitment to quality enhancement. Five of the HECA colleges were represented at the insights workshop.

To assist with the facilitation of this workshop, a further analysis of the data was carried out, to consolidate the research findings. This analysis resulted in the identification of six key strands in the work. Some of the strands are bigger than others and some intersect. Each strand represents a consistent thread identified in the data. An illustration of this exercise is presented in Table 3, below.

Table 3: Table Illustrating the Alignment of Focus Group Findings, Underpinning Literature, Observations and the Key Strands Identified

HECA focus group finding	Underpinning literature	Observation to inform the HAQEF workshop "Connected conversations"	Strand identified
Adaptability during challenging times of change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QQI (2020) • Denyer (2017) • Lewin (1958) • Nandy et al. (2021) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The "grand challenges" • What are the lessons learned in the efforts to support dynamic change and respond rapidly to environmental stimuli? • Can HECA colleges build resilience to respond to future shocks in a better way? • What is needed to make this happen? 	Adaptability/ operational management
Teaching strategies during emergency remote teaching Flipped classroom/ hybrid/blended having multiple meanings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Garrison et al (2000) • Günbatar (2021) • O'Flaherty and Phillips (2015) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared understanding of blended/hybrid/remote learning across the HECA community • Building Communities Of Inquiry 	Teaching and learning strategies
Students spending more time independently completing online learning tasks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Giddens (1984) • Zimmerman (2011) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting students to develop self-regulation skills • Promoting student agency/ autonomy 	Supporting students

HECA focus group finding	Underpinning literature	Observation to inform the HAQEF workshop “Connected conversations”	Strand identified
<p>Teaching and learning in a networked culture</p> <p>Suitability of video conferencing software as a teaching platform</p> <p>Changing patterns and modes of student-to-educator communications</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prensky (2010) • Boyd (2014) • Garrison et al (2000) • Cheung et al. (2008) • Barouhmi (2015) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating sense of community online • Communicating Professional values and identities online • Building a Community Of Inquiry online • Quality Assurance and Enhancement policy surrounding communication strategies with students • Guidance on communicating online 	Teaching and learning strategies
<p>Accessibility and inclusion</p> <p>Reasonable accommodations</p> <p>UDL</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rose and Meyer (2002) • AHEAD (2021) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrating UDL in teaching practice. • Addressing the digital divide • Promoting flexible learning options with choice for students • Improving the experience for students with disabilities 	Teaching and learning strategies
<p>Peer support – staff and student networks of support</p> <p>Social importance of the college experience</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yang (2020) • NStEP (2016) • Tinto (1993) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student engagement • Mechanisms for meaningful student partnership • Promoting peer support networks • Opportunities for students to socialise online • Staff peer networks 	<p>Supporting staff</p> <p>Supporting students</p>
<p>Assessment practices</p> <p>Authentic assessment</p> <p>OBEs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rose and Meyer (2002) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering diversity in assessment • Selecting and applying fit-for-purpose assessment 	Assessment
Academic integrity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • QQI (2021) • Newton (2018) • DCU (2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principles of academic integrity – sharing and collaboration across HECA • Using the VLE to promote and protect academic integrity 	Academic integrity

5.1 Findings

Strand

1

Adaptability/Operational Management

It was noted by workshop participants that the willingness of different providers to communicate with each other, within HECA and across the wider sector, was considered one of the hallmarks of an open and collegiate culture created in the very early stages of emergency remote teaching. This highlighted the community value of HECA providers to communicate authentically and openly with each other, harnessing lessons learned and building a collective resilience.

Internal communication strategies and decision-making, and how students were engaged as partners in this process, are also viewed as very positive developments across the sector. To leverage the ground gained here, there is a strong appetite to retain and promote participative decision-making, involving a wide range of stakeholders, at all levels.

The responsiveness of QQI in communicating contingency arrangements, and their openness in accommodating the multiple requests from providers, were also noted as commendable, given the extraordinary circumstances and tight timelines involved. HECA libraries were acknowledged as playing an instrumental role in working with college departments to ensure that they were not siloed, thus strengthening existing communication systems.

Strand

2

Teaching and Learning Strategies

It was agreed that a clarification of concepts around blended/hybrid learning models has merit in providing additional clarity within HECA institutions. This would also support a meaningful dialogue across the independent higher education sector. It was also noted that the common understanding of terms/concepts would add greater clarity at validation panel events, preventing misinterpretations or simply spending less time on explaining terms. Additionally, it was felt that further outputs from QQI's full consultation with providers on online learning delivery would greatly assist the process of commonality with concepts.

Workshop participants shared some concerns about teaching in a networked culture and the resulting challenges, particularly in the ways in which students can “feel the love” and form bonds with each other on digital platforms. There was general agreement that developing a sense of community online is challenging, but a necessary factor for student satisfaction and success. One college noted the parallel efforts of educators encouraging students to develop and maintain networks in online spaces, using the example of LinkedIn as an online space. Some educators encouraged students to share their academic achievements on this platform, sowing the seeds or adding to their curation of a professional identity. This example illustrates the complex nature of the increasingly blurred boundaries that exist in today's digitally infused learning environment.

Strand

3

Supporting Students

It was noted that changes to the assessment landscape consequently place more emphasis on students to manage their own learning. The example of OBEs was cited as one assessment method that encourages more student autonomy, in the management and execution of higher order skills and strategies. It was noted that further changes should be made to assessments to promote more autonomy in the learning process and appeal to diverse student preferences.

In the spirit of cross-collaboration across the independent college sector, there is an appetite to support HECA staff with sharing new knowledge and skills required to engage their students by using new practices in light of increased online provision. This relates to the need for a shared understanding of teaching and learning concepts, such as blended, hybrid, or the flipped classroom.

It was noted that HECA libraries have a strong demonstrated history of collaboration and sharing resources across the entire community. Most recently this was evidenced with the dissemination and promotion of resources on academic integrity. It was felt that as discussions arising from the sharing of information often feed into other areas, there is great scope for further collaboration and strengthening of the community of practice within HECA, the prospect and potential of which was viewed very positively by participants.

Strand

4

Assessment

There was a general consensus of a need to approach the design of assessments creatively, in order to facilitate all students in participating and succeeding in their learning. In keeping with the theme of collegiate collaboration, it was noted the sharing of what worked well/what did not work well with regard to alternative assessment design would be a very welcome resource across HECA colleges. Participants strongly agreed that the HECA community had a wealth of rich and contextualised experience to share. Making the assessment process accessible to all students was considered an essential fundamental of best-practice assessment design, with initiatives such as the National Forum's Universal Design for Learning digital badge strongly encouraged to support staff to expand assessment options for students.

Strand

5

Academic Integrity

Raising awareness around academic integrity among the staff and student population was agreed as a priority for each HECA college. The risks involved with engaging with essay mills, and the use of social media to advertise these services, are very real and present threats to all students. It was noted that more resources are urgently required to guide, inform and support staff and students. QQI's NAIN network was regarded as a good example of provision of support for HECA colleges in navigating the landscape and identifying areas of support for their students and staff.

It was noted that most HECA libraries carry the function of promoting academic integrity and house the resources in this space.

Strand

6

Supporting Staff

Drop-in clinics held during emergency remote teaching were noted as flexible, well-attended staff supports that recreated the "tap on the door" of a physical office, from which peer driven conversation could occur. There was general agreement of the need to maintain this supportive space and the importance of this should not be overlooked, post-pandemic. Sharing information and recommendations across digitally accessible platforms was considered the best approach to maintaining the culture of community among HECA staff. It was noted that a number of HECA colleges are located across several sites and staff gain a sense of solidarity through technologically enhanced communication. Libguides were cited as successful collaborative communication tools for staff and students. Libguides are content management systems and information sharing platform used by some HECA college libraries.



6 | Discussion

There is a body of global literature emerging, describing the spectrum of experiences from higher education staff and students, working and learning during the pandemic. There is also a lot more to discover. The five focus groups conducted as part of this research provide a snapshot of the experiences of HECA educators and students, teaching and learning, in the context of an evolving public health crisis. The findings contain past reflections and future-oriented hopes and ambitions, generously offered from participating HECA staff and students.

The HECA partner contribution to the national Next Steps project simultaneously served as a body of research that would inform the strategic collective goals of HECA colleges. With this in mind, the research design focused on capturing primary data from across the spectrum of colleges. This research provides the first step in the development of a narrative that describes the experiences of HECA staff and students of the teaching learning and assessment practices undertaken during emergency remote teaching.

The aim of this research was to identify the TLA practices selected and applied during emergency remote learning in COVID-19 and how these were experienced by educators and students in HECA Colleges. To identify the TLA practices utilised during COVID-19, how these changed in relation to previous practices, and what innovations have occurred, the following research questions were explored:

- i. What were educators' experiences of delivering these TLA practices?
- ii. What were students' experiences of these TLA practices?
- iii. What were student support staff experiences of these TLA practices?

Some findings are not surprising, or were expected, particularly in the areas of teaching strategies and the early adoption of the blended model, allowing for the multiple interpretations of the term "blended" and how this was defined by each college. This validated HECA educators' demonstration of reflective practice, responding to the challenges of teaching during a pandemic with agility and purpose. As a result, there is a wealth of rich information that identifies what worked well, and what needs to be improved upon or developed further. Individual programme teams must continue to record this information, encouraged by senior management, in order to continually capture any unfolding changes.

Other findings were unexpected. The emphasis on digital communications was a very strong theme. Digital identities and "ways of being" in online learning spaces are areas that warrant further development, as we evolve our understanding of blended learning and continue to build online learning communities. As a result of the ubiquitous use of mobile technologies, and against the backdrop of emergency remote teaching, HECA educators and students acknowledge a significant change in their communication patterns and preferences. These changes in practice require simultaneous critical evaluation of the relevant underpinning policies to define and inform the possibilities and avoid any pitfalls with these interactions.

The pandemic brought change and disruption that unearthed a wide range of taken-for-granted truths in higher education. How and when students learn, how educators facilitate this learning, and the spaces within which this happens, has changed. Learning in an online environment does not preclude being on-campus. The campus experience is now, more than ever, multidimensional and must reflect both the diversity of teaching and learning activities and the social fabric that knits contemporary community values for all staff and students.

An understanding of the evolving role of the educator is important. It is widely accepted that our student profiles are rich in diversity. So too are the lives and experiences of our educators. Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) must be an instinctive lens through which we view all TLA activities to ensure that staff and students experience a sense of belonging in the academic community. HECA educators must continue to be understood as crucial actors in a very rich ecosystem. Continued dialogue from this cohort must be relentlessly pursued and facilitated by every mechanism possible, in order to reveal precision insight into the direction of current TLA practices.

In the spirit of connected conversations, cross-collaboration within colleges requires meaningful partnership between all members of the education community, across different role contexts and levels. In response to the pandemic, decisions were made under extraordinary constraints. Quick decision-making can carry risks. Early conversations surrounding TLA modifications took place at a time when avoiding disruptions to provision was the primary objective. Educators face a new dawn of TLA practice, post-2020. Support in developing confidence around the changing TLA practices can come through whole institution initiatives led by senior management, along with staff peer support networks. The transference of these peer networks to online platforms, is another interesting observation resulting from emergency remote teaching.

Crucially, decision-making processes must involve the meaningful inclusion of the student voice, harnessing their passion and enthusiasm to shape our learning environments for the better. Effective student engagement remains paramount as we continue to experience the effects of the pandemic on TLA practices, engaging with the student body to co-create solutions to our collective challenges.

Assessment is a vehicle that can unlock transformational change across the student experience. In light of alternative assessment design enacted during emergency remote teaching and strong evidence in current literature, timely conversations are continuing to interrogate the decisions. Is the academic integrity of assessment protected? Is assessment authentic and respectful of learner preferences? Providing for a diverse assessment portfolio requires a critical evaluation of the suitability and viability of individual assessment strategies. Every opportunity to build upon the principles of UDL must be leveraged across the entire academic community. The assumption of homogeneity continues to be challenged – HECA classrooms are vibrant and diverse settings. It is important that this diversity is harnessed when facilitating students to demonstrate their knowledge, skills and competence, using expertly designed, carefully considered assessments.

Peer-led support is viewed by the majority of students as an essential “life-line”, with great weight attributed to the overall student experience hinging on students’ ability to access and maintain sustained communications with each other. HECA colleges are faced with some decisions in this regard. On the one hand, colleges should do everything they can to facilitate students’ engagement in order to develop a strong sense of community among their student bodies. However, there are some additional considerations. HECA colleges must reflect on what their responsibility is for policing or regulating student peer forums. There is potential for a blurring of the boundaries of personal and collective lines, within which HECA colleges must differentiate and define certain rules of engagement.

It is evident that student-led instant messaging services are an established practice for the overwhelming majority of students. HECA colleges need to consider integrating elements of this communication preference into communications strategies that engage all students. The literature supports this view. Instant messaging services, less-formal mechanisms for students to maintain contact with the college, etc., are becoming key features of communication strategies in academic institutions globally.

Alongside the technologically driven innovations in teaching and learning are the cultural changes occurring across the wider landscape. In its broadest form, cultural change results from a transformation of individual and collective values and practices, through processes of discovery. Cultural change can also be defined as the modification or discontinuance of existing “tried and tested” procedures transmitted to us from the culture of the past (Dressler and Caens, 1973).

In 2021, HECA colleges began a unique process of discovery that has (so far) revealed teaching and learning as a vital core function carrying great transformational change across the sector. As we continue to articulate the learnings from this process, it is clear that we must critically evaluate the viability of some procedures and practices of our past, in order to design and implement the best version of our future vision.

Recommendations are listed below to address the findings of this research. These recommendations are developed with underpinning policy and best practice in teaching and learning in mind.

7 | Recommendations

7.1 Policy

- 1. HECA colleges must critically examine their current policies surrounding digital communication strategies, to identify policies and guidance that supports online interactions.**

Staff and students require this information in clear, unambiguous terms. Etiquette guidelines for digital communications/online interactions are needed, as a matter of priority.
- 2. HECA colleges must reflect on and agree their own interpretation of blended learning and the institutional policies and guidelines that result from this process.**

The QQI published Quality Assurance Guidelines for Blended Learning Programmes should inform this work.
- 3. EDI must be clearly articulated and implemented across all areas of policy in HECA colleges to advance a meaningful culture of inclusion.**

EDI is an important overarching strategic aim.
- 4. To support diversity in governance and decision-making, key policy in this area should promote cross-functional or departmental decision-making teams.**

This policy enabler also provides added value in building resilience and planning for potential future shocks to the sector.
- 5. Student engagement policy must clearly outline the commitment of HECA colleges, to provide multiple pathways or mechanisms for meaningful student partnership.**

A critical review of student engagement policy is required, to ensure that robust processes of student dialogue are enabled, informed by outputs from the NStEP.

7.2 Practice

- 1. Continued partnership with teaching and learning specialist staff is necessary to support the provision of programmes that are academically rigorous and delivered holistically, using best-practice teaching and learning innovations.**

HECA colleges must strengthen this partnership by encouraging cross-departmental and cross-institutional events to engage and support all staff. The National Forum seminar series is an example of successful collaboration in this space.
- 2. Assessment is a major area of focus in the changing teaching and learning landscape. Providing for a variety of assessments involves student consultation, awareness of the role of UDL, and a critical evaluation of the suitability of chosen assessment methods.**

HECA colleges must therefore prioritise the promotion of UDL, both at individual programme level and in wider college activities (student support, library services, etc.).
- 3. HECA colleges must consider how to support the many flexible and varied ways that students access their learning.**

There is a need to reiterate and redefine the broadest possible definition of “spaces”, for example, social engagement across campuses (on and offline). Spaces need to be created to support social and learning interactions.
- 4. HECA colleges must develop student learning supports to assist students’ development of self-regulation skills, promoting student agency and autonomy as critical skills required for academic success.**

The provision of these supports is a clear response to the changing learning landscape with blended delivery models and the changing nature of how students manage their learning.

- 5. Every opportunity must be explored to build on the momentum gathered in fostering collaboration across college departments.**

Peer networks worked successfully online for HECA students and staff. HECA colleges must provide a supportive culture, with enabling practices created to facilitate the ongoing development of online and offline peer networks.
- 6. Continuous professional development for HECA educators must include an exploration of the changing role of the lecturer in the post-COVID landscape.**

Areas such as digital skills and digital confidence have an increased strategic importance, resulting from greater engagement with digital learning methodologies.
- 7. Every effort must be made to identify and address digital divides among staff and students.**

Senior college management must allocate the necessary resources to implement strategies for removing barriers to accessing digital technology.
- 8. The promotion of an inclusive culture requires a whole-institution approach to enact the policy commitments of EDI, and translating these into tangible practical outcomes.**

An EDI working group, tasked with this specific function and purpose, is strongly recommended within each HECA college.
- 9. There must be an immediate mobilisation of a HECA teaching and learning collaborative group to share best-practice pedagogical approaches and strategies across the community.**

The success of the HAQEF group demonstrates the unique community value of the HECA network. There is a clear need for a similar teaching and learning-specific forum to facilitate collegiate support for the large diverse population of HECA educators.
- 10. HECA colleges must assume an anticipatory duty to appropriately resource and provide wellbeing supports that address the human needs of all staff and students.**

Colleges must place the welfare of all community members at the forefront of institutional strategies, prioritising accessible high-quality, sustainable resources and supports.

8 | Conclusion

The unique opportunity to participate as a partner in the Next Steps project further solidifies HECA's position as a collective that is united by a desire to connect, support and inform all those involved in the enhancement of teaching and learning in HECA colleges. The five focus group meetings facilitated as part of this research, provide a snapshot of the experiences of HECA educators and students in teaching and learning in the context of an evolving public health crisis. The findings contain past reflections and future-oriented hopes and ambitions generously offered from a broad spectrum of HECA staff and students.

This research is the first step in the development of a narrative that describes the experiences of HECA staff and students of the TLA practices undertaken during emergency remote teaching. As Ireland continues to experience the impact of the pandemic, the insights presented are part of a fast-moving story. Higher education institutions continue to provide an anchor for students, in a sea of unpredictability, with many lessons learned. It is important to acknowledge the ground gained and to avoid revisiting prior practice that no longer caters to students' needs in the post-COVID landscape, particularly in areas of access and inclusion.

HECA will use the Next Steps project findings to contextualise its own evidence-based vision of a post-pandemic teaching and learning landscape. This project has helped to find clarity in the detail of our peers' lived experiences and inspiration from the collective consciousness of the sector. Greeting the dawning of a new horizon brings a responsibility for us to continue our critical conversations towards a shared vision that enacts meaningful and far-reaching change.

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10 | Appendices

Appendix 1. Additional Descriptions of Participants' Experiences

At the end of each focus group, participants were invited to contribute descriptive words, in response to the following two big picture questions:

1. In three words, please describe what (bespoke option for each group) teaching/learning/ supporting students during the pandemic is like for you.
2. In three words, please describe your ideal future learning environment in 2021/22.

This exercise empowered the participants to use their own language to add finishing touches to the illustration of their experiences during emergency remote teaching. This also encouraged further thought about what the future teaching and learning landscape might look like.

The word clouds presented in the figures below illustrate the participants' responses.



Figure 1: Word cloud illustrating educators' response to the question: In three words, please describe what remote teaching is like for you, during the pandemic



Figure 2: Word cloud illustrating students' response to the question: In three words, please describe what remote learning is like for you



Figure 3: Word cloud illustrating student support staff response to the question: In three words, please describe what supporting learning during the pandemic is like for you?



Figure 4: Word cloud illustrating educators' response to the question: In three words please describe your ideal future learning environment in 2021/22



Figure 5: Word cloud illustrating students' response to the question: In three words please describe your ideal future learning environment in 2021/22

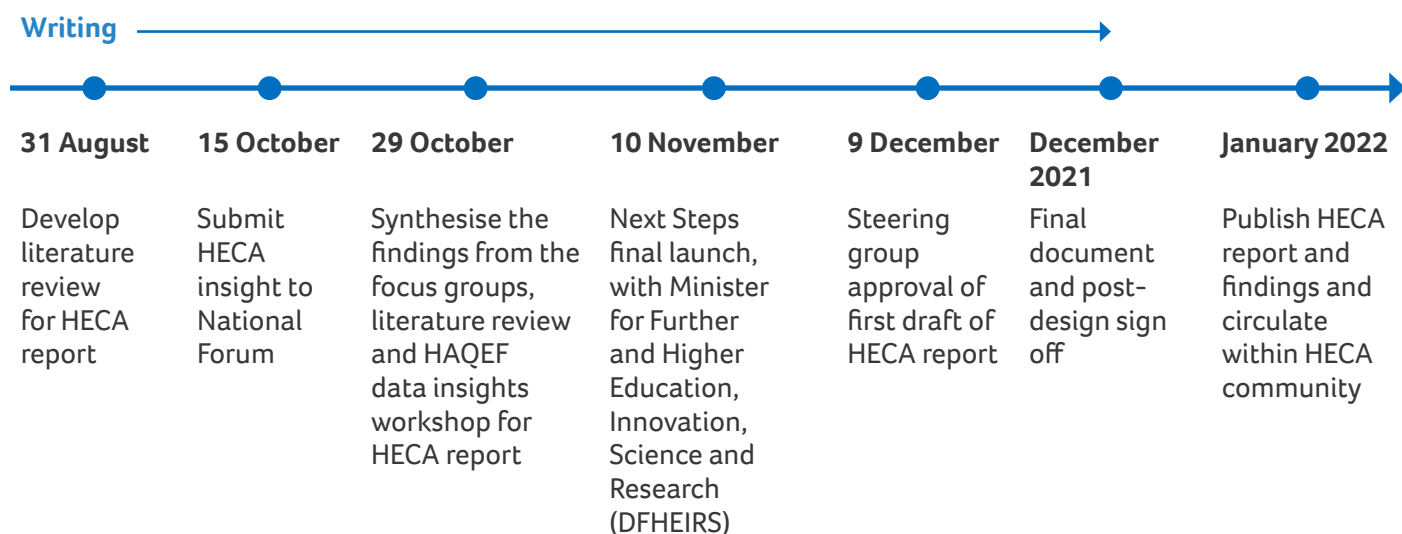
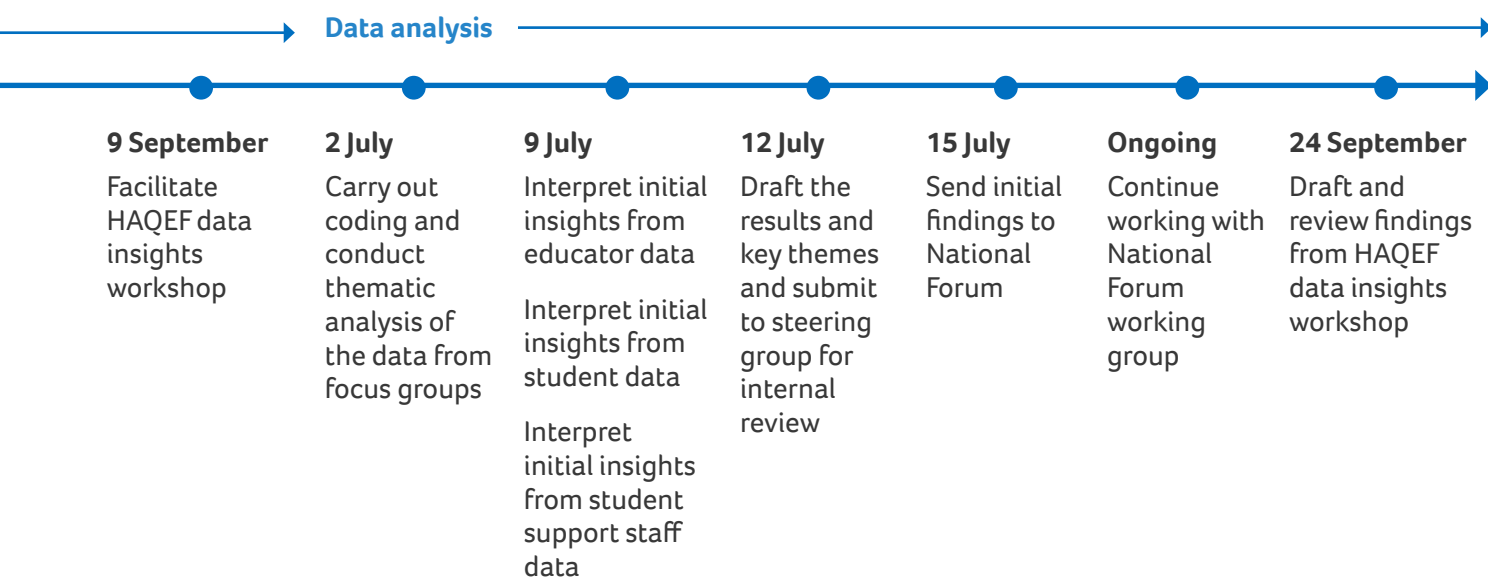


Figure 6: Word cloud illustrating student support staff response to the question: In three words please describe your ideal future learning environment in 2021/22

Appendix 2. Project Timeline

Table 4: Table Illustrating research project timeline

Establishing research aim and recruitment	Background research	Research design and planning	Data collection			
17 May Establish overall research aim Recruit a lead researcher	1 June Define and agree on research design and research questions.	11 June Design discussion prompts for focus groups Identify champions to promote the research internally in HECA colleges. Ask each HECA college to nominate three staff members, two students and one student support staff member Submit ethical approval application to Griffith College Research Ethics Committee and obtain ethical clearance	15, 16 June Facilitate five HECA research focus groups: Two educator focus groups	17, 21 June Two student focus groups	22 June One student support staff focus group	25 June Make transcriptions available to support analysis



Appendix 3. Questions Used during HECA Next Steps Focus Group Meetings

Educator Focus Group Questions

1. What new teaching practices did you **start** or begin using during emergency remote teaching?
2. What teaching practices will you **stop or use less frequently**, when emergency remote teaching ends?
3. What teaching practices will you **continue** to use, when emergency remote teaching ends?
4. What assessment practices did you **start** or begin using during emergency remote teaching?
5. What assessment practices do you think you will **stop or use less frequently**, when emergency remote teaching ends?
6. What assessment practices will you **continue** to use, when emergency remote teaching ends?

Student Focus Group Questions

1. What learning practices – activities and techniques – did you **start or begin using** during emergency remote teaching?
2. What learning practices – activities and techniques – do you think you will **stop, or use less frequently**, when emergency remote teaching ends?
3. What learning practices – activities and techniques – do you think you will **continue** to use, when emergency remote teaching ends?
4. What kind of assessments did you **start** to do during emergency remote teaching?
5. What kind of assessments do you think should **stop or reduce**, when during emergency remote teaching ends?
6. What kind of assessments would you like to see **continued**, when emergency remote teaching ends?

Student Support Staff Focus Group Questions

1. What teaching and learning support practices did you **start** or begin using during emergency remote teaching?
2. What teaching and learning support practices do you think you will **stop or use less frequently**, when emergency remote teaching ends?
3. What teaching and learning support practices will you **continue** to use, when emergency remote teaching ends?
4. What assessment practices did you **start** to support students with during emergency remote teaching?
5. Question 5: What assessment practices did you **stop, or reduce your time** supporting students with, during emergency remote teaching?
6. What assessment practices would you like to see **continued**, when emergency remote teaching ends?

Two Final Big Picture Questions to Close the Focus Groups

Typed by participants, using the chat function on Zoom:

1. In three words, please describe what teaching/ learning/supporting learning (bespoke option for each group) was like for you.
2. In three words, please describe your ideal future learning environment.

