CUA Reflections on COVID Teaching, Learning & Assessment Experience

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Teaching, Learning & Assessment Experience

Section 1: Introduction

Reflecting on the response by higher education institutes to the challenges involved in the sudden relocation of teaching, learning and assessment away from the traditional campus environment, is presented in a variety of reports prepared by the QQI, the National Forum for Teaching and Learning, the USI, and staff and student COVID learning experience reports from GMIT, IT Sligo and LYIT

Overall, the reports refer to the enormity of what was achieved through dedication, collaboration and innovation in moving teaching, learning and assessment online. Extraordinary goodwill was demonstrated by those who learn, teach, support and lead across the higher education sector and much was learned for the future. In an effort, to capture and share this learning with CUA colleagues, a summary of the recent COVID learning, teaching and assessment experience report findings and themes is presented in Figure 1 (see page 3). A brief introduction on each national report, is outlined below:

Report 1: QQI Evaluation of COVID Impact on Learning, Teaching & Assessment (August 2020)

This report is a high-level preliminary analysis of experiences reported in a range of different formats by a wide range of organisations including universities, institutes of technology, education and training boards, private HE institutions, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), AONTAS, AHEAD, and others. The analysis is broad and focusses on issues rather than on institutions. In broad terms, the report presents a picture of the higher education experience since the emergency commenced on March 12th and covers what was done, what worked well, and what did not work well.

Report 2: USI Report on the Student Experience & COVID (July 2020)

The USI COVID survey report illustrates some of the key challenges that many learners faced during the rapid move to emergency remote teaching. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible to adequately capture the experience of every student across such a diverse learning population, but what was learned from this survey is that, in spite of the diverse population within third-level education, many students faced common challenges. This report outlines some of the shared experiences of students over the last few months: of connectivity problems and inadequate study spaces, of lost employment and lost motivation. Many students were helped through the period by those around them including family and friends, their peers and their teaching staff, and this narrative came through clearly in the responses received.

Report 3: National Forum for Teaching and Learning, Reflecting & Learning [June 2020]

Following the closure of higher education institutions across Ireland on March 12th, 2020, the entire higher education community mobilised at speed to ensure student learning could continue through online/remote teaching and assessment approaches. With a view to capturing what had been learned from this extraordinary semester, the National Forum reached out to teaching and learning higher education associates and leaders across the sector. This briefing paper summarises the insights shared and considers what the insights mean for the enhancement of teaching and learning in the near and longer-term future.

Section 2: Summary of reflections emerging from the COVID higher education experience reports

A summary of the recent COVID higher education reports, reflecting on the learning, teaching and assessment experience, is presented in Figure 1 below. The findings are categorised under eleven themes including: *working and studying at home; teaching and learning; assessment; policies and procedures; college experience; digital skills and academic CPD; communications; health and wellbeing; fees and finance; resources, supports and access; return to campus.*

Figure 1: Summary of the report findings and related themes

Theme	Report 1 QQI	Report 2 USI	Report 3 National Forum T&L	Report 4 GMIT LTA Reflections	Report 5 IT Sligo LTA Reflections	Report 6 LYIT LTA Reflections
Working & Studying from Home	**Information technology infrastructure was critically important** in enabling the rapid change. Without it, almost everything would have ground to a virtual halt. However, resource problems e.g. access to reliable broadband or suitable devices made remote access a challenge for some students and staff. **Challenges arose for some in following areas:** *the quality of technology-mediated interactions between people; other limitations of available educational technology; adapting pedagogy at short notice; restricted activities; the changes to the learning environment from a student perspective; staff workload; delays*	**Just under a third reported issues with access to Wi-Fi.** 35% of students felt they did not have adequate access to online learning content. **Recommendations from students to support learning remotely include:** • Ensure that all online content is delivered in a manner that makes it accessible to all students e.g. those with connectivity problems. • Ensure that online content is accessible for students from all backgrounds e.g. that text files are screen reader compatible. • **Training and support for students using digital tools, particularly for uploading of assignments and online examinations.**	It was rapidly discovered that many students and staff **do not have consistent access to reliable Wi-Fi** and/or suitable devices or learning environments for working/studying from home.	**The main issues reported by students:** • a struggle to build consistent motivation independently. • the difficulty in creating a suitable home working environment • a struggle to maintain motivation or to build a positive working schedule during remote learning. **Staff campaign feedback:** Overall one of the highest-ranking topics was staff workload, many staff members feel that online assessment demands greater consideration. Some staff feel that they have taken on responsibilities that were once facilitated by the examination's office. However, despite the unprecedented	**Student Experience** *Findings based on survey of full-time students completed in June 2020. 206 respondents.* **Student identified Positives:** 98% of students had access to a laptop. Own laptop (79%) shared with household (19%) 35% of students agreed or strongly agreed they were happy to engage in remote T&L. 56% agreed they had the resources (hardware/software) to participate actively in remote T&L 68% said they understood how to use the technology needed for remote T&L. **Negatives/Issues/challenges:** In the survey students were asked how the	**Studying from home was a positive experience for some students:** *Increased flexibility; learned new skills, able to undertake more independent learning* **Challenges arose for some students in the following areas:** *inappropriate physical environment; lack of adequate hardware equipment; poor connectivity; juggling caring responsibilities with study; absence of normal childcare supports; balancing remote learning with changed work commitments; lack of normal supports for students with disabilities.*

in securing professional recognition body approvals in some cases; library, copyright and data issues; issues arising from individual circumstances.	• Full access to required learning resources online, where physical access to libraries cannot be facilitated e.g. ensure all databases are accessible off campus. • Provisions to be put in place for students who do not have access to devices or live in low connectivity areas.		circumstances staff morale remains high with 86% of staff members agreeing that GMIT are 'commendable' for maintaining a positive attitude at this time.	transition to remote teaching and learning impacted their engagement and learning this semester and the response was: 7 promotors (4%) 21 passives (10%) 178 detractors (86%) 75% of student respondents felt isolated as a student and not connected to the college or their course. 50% of respondents said they didn't feel like doing coursework at home.	

Teaching and Learning					
Teaching and learning continued remotely by email, VLE, digital communications platforms, online video channels, collaborative file-sharing software, telephone calls, text messages and post. **In the circumstances the teaching in second semester seems to have gone reasonably well in that higher education programmes have generally not been delayed (with some exceptions) or completely derailed.** **The principle of the conservation of essential learning outcomes helped focus minds on what needed to be done rather than what could no longer be done. Time invested by the institutions in the elaboration of intended programme and module learning outcomes over the past 20 years stood them in good stead**	**77% agreed that 'access to online learning was sufficiently available to complete my studies'. Free Text responses indicate that the 12.8% of respondents who disagreed or strongly disagreed mostly had issues regarding broadband speed or access to electronic devices. Some others cited issues accessing electronic copies of core textbooks.** **'Overall, the online content offered to me was of good quality' Just over half (51.6%) agreed with this statement, with 28.5% in disagreement and just under a fifth (19.1%) remaining neutral. Again, comments indicate that the experience varied from programme to programme, and between individual modules. Those on practically-based programmes, and maths students were**	**The vital role of teaching and learning units was highlighted, and the front-line role they played, when the crisis emerged.** **The importance of teaching and learning itself, has never been more evident in higher education. How well individual departments and institutions were positioned to support students and staff through this crisis was noted to have been influenced by the investment of time and resources in digital (and non-digital) teaching and learning structures, resources, communities and leaders that had already taken place.** **Although institutional closures were unforeseen, much of the work of the sector in the years leading to 2020 enabled and empowered the higher education community to respond**	**Student suggestions to improve online learning included:** **- Making sure that online lectures are recorded and uploaded for re-watching.** **- Breaking lectures into shorter sessions that would be more suitable for online learning with less engagement opportunities.** **- Scheduling more discussion-based video calls with lecturers and/or classmates.** **- 16 statements were submitted under the topic of 'practical subjects' and the student view is practical subjects are incompatible with remote learning.** **- a statement that received strong agreement over 54%** *'in light of the speed in which the national emergency happened, I was happy with GMIT's response and help from lecturers. Online recorded*	**The student survey highlighted the following concerns with the transition to remote T&L:** **Reduced learning opportunities (69%)** **Changes to assessment methods including exams to alternative assessments (60%)** **Not being able to communicate with classmates (55%)** **Online Teaching Experience** **According to the staff survey of June 2020, 50% of academic staff have at least one year's experience of teaching online with 22% have at least five years' experience. 36% of teaching staff had no prior experience of online teaching.** **Academic staff ranked the following concerns with the transition to remote working:** **Diminished student learning 66%**	**Online learning was a positive experience for some students:** Students *felt supported by recorded lectures, quick responses to emails, knowing their lecturers and peers prior to Covid-19 and clear communication around assessment and scheduling of online teaching.* **Challenges arose for some students in the following areas:** *Slow response to emails and information requests; absence of "online" teaching, engaging in different online platforms within or across modules; significant reduction in teaching time; lack of digital skills to engage with online learning; delivery of content too compressed and lack of coverage of some content areas.*

during this emergency.

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

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

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

more likely to indicate issues with the quality of online content. The general consensus was that a more consistent approach to online learning would be appreciated.

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

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

in an informed and cohesive manner to the unexpected situation in which it found itself. Robust and relevant knowledge and experience had been developed which was transferred, re-purposed and re-imagined as necessary when the context of teaching and learning was suddenly transformed.

A number of people reflected that their prior resistance to online/remote delivery has been overcome rapidly, with many finding that the perceived challenges were not really challenges at all.

The complexities of online/remote learning came to be more widely acknowledged as requiring technical skill, conscious facilitation techniques and reflective approaches.

lectures and live lectures were helpful'.

Staff campaign feedback: there is an overall positive sentiment among GMIT staff regarding the institute's ability to continue online learning and assessment in the coming semester.

GMIT academic community feel GMIT has made substantial efforts to provide staff with various supports and training. Multiple statements refer to the benefits of these supports, namely GMIT T&L Office, the Digital Ed Forum and BOLT initiative.

Not being able to communicate with students 36%
Online privacy, protection of student data 31%
Evaluation of their teaching effectiveness 43%

85% of lecturers said they were willing to experiment with different methods of remote teaching and assessment

Lack of access to work placements, specialist equipment or facilities was a tough challenge.

It was repeatedly recognised that teaching and learning, whether in person or mediated by a device, is always centred on people and pedagogy.

Assessment					
Three overarching principles guided the majority of providers and the development of their alternative assessment proposals: • designing alternative assessment methodologies to examinations that appropriately assess programme, stage or module learning outcomes • protecting the academic integrity of qualification-awarding processes • ensuring that students were not 'disadvantaged' by the alternative modes of assessment. Institutions found various alternatives to invigilated in-person written exams for assessing learners' achievement of intended learning outcomes (ILOs) including the use of one or more of the following: • continuous assessment • non-proctored online examinations	Assessment recommendations noted include: • More structured and systematic means of accessing online content, with a more consistent use of online platforms across all teaching staff. • Institutions to put in place more regular communication with students and avoid bunching of assessment deadlines. 38.42% of students feel that they performed significantly worse as a result of alternative assessments, with 17.05% feeling that they performed significantly better.	Authentic assessment in some subject areas, such as medicine, teaching, sport science, and design, suffered as a result of the move to online/remote learning, while authentic assessment in other subject areas, such as computing and communications, were less impacted. Particular elements of curricula, including work placements and study abroad periods, became deeply disrupted by the crisis and developing flexible alternative routes to the achievement of related learning outcomes, in consultation with staff and students, will be essential to future planning. There is an increased appetite to re-think traditional assessment practices. Staff particularly valued support in ensuring academic integrity and in designing	Staff campaign feedback: the topic that garnered the most attention in the discussion was student assessment. However, despite this topic being "top of mind", it ranked relatively low in importance in comparison to issues such as student engagement and staff workload. Although a necessary action, participants have stressed that online learning and assessment should not be treated as a long-term solution and where possible the institute should try and adapt their strategy to facilitate traditional methods. In the meantime, a call for 'proctoring' measures for online assessment was looked upon favourably by many.	Student feedback 60% of surveyed students were concerned with changes to assessment methods (including exams to alternative assessments) Academic staff were provided with guidance and resources on how to create alternative assessments including: Open-book exams MCQs Objective Tests Oral Exams/Presentations Reflective journals Projects Portfolios Many traditional exams were replaced with unsupervised, online assessments such as open-book exams set up in Moodle Lecturers asked if online proctoring could be used for exams but our proctoring provider, Examity could not provide in person	Student feedback highlighted the following as key supports for online assessment: Clear and open communication supports student engagement with assessment. Co-ordination of the timing and nature of assessments within a programme assists student to manage their workload. Where new assessment practices are introduced, consideration should be given to providing opportunities to practice this type of assessment. Additional training to support engagement with online assessment, particularly around the uploading of assessed work where new technology is used.

with a long time-window
• non-proctored online examinations with a short time-window
• proctored online examinations.
Note: Non-proctored exams were typically 'open-book'.

Non-proctored open-book examinations were more susceptible to cheating than the proctored unseen written examinations that they sometimes replaced.

Learner survey data suggest that the majority of learners felt confident in their ability to complete their assessments and felt that they were fair.

Responses from practitioners indicate confidence in the integrity of assessment although some responses indicate a lack of awareness among practitioners of

alternative assessments that were tailored to the online space while still meeting the learning outcomes of the given module. This learning will now be carried forward as new modules and assessments are designed.

Designing assessments for the online environment takes more time, and more student preparation, and that instructions for such assessment need to be more detailed and explicit than when there is an opportunity to explain and discuss in person.

proctoring due to the closure of their centres because of the pandemic.

IT Sligo provides online courses for staff and students on Academic Integrity and has established a working group on assessment of learning under its Academic Council.

measures to support academic integrity in an online/remote context.

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

| Policies and Procedures | Institutions primarily used their existing management and quality assurance infrastructure to govern change management.

Several providers reported producing procedures on arrangements for modifications to assessments informed by guidance produced by QQI.

The assumed heightened risk to academic integrity due to the replacement of invigilated in-person examinations with non-proctored online examinations or increased continuous assessment will require continued vigilance in 20/21 and some more robust ways of remotely assessing but we cannot yet quantify the change in risk. QQI have described the strategies that institutions have used to draw students' attention to the | A whole-institution approach, with clear leadership and lines of responsibility is fundamental.

Institutional processes and structures need to be flexible and adaptable enough to allow for unforeseen circumstances.

In response to the crisis, new policies were also developed, such as those that sought to implement measures to mitigate against potential disadvantage including removing academic and financial penalties for resit assessments, enhancing extenuating circumstances policies and affording additional powers of discretion to examination boards. It was suggested that there may be merit in reviewing institutional risk strategies, or equivalent, in the future to ensure that effective mitigation | |
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expectations regarding academic integrity. In their communications to students they draw students' attention to codes of academic conduct (e.g. honour codes) and they require students to sign integrity declarations when taking non-proctored examinations.	against academic disadvantage is included within this.

| College Experience | The induction of new students and returning progressing students will need to be a priority as will access to specialist facilities and equipment. | Over a third (35.84%) of students reported not having opportunities to engage with other classmates.

Nearly 80% of students listed lack of motivation as one of the major barriers they faced. | In-person interaction was also seen as important in creating a sense of belonging and community and inducting students and staff into their institution and its ways: 'Being able to talk stuff out loud, ask those questions which may seem 'stupid', be accompanied to places and events (canteen; library; student services; chaplaincy, etc.), explain how things work – essentially giving the student a confidence to navigate the language, landscape and nuances of third level is critically important'. | Engagement with friends, the social aspect of college and other elements of the on-campus college experience came up throughout the discussion. From the loss of interaction and exchange found in lecture halls to the soft skills development, to simply missing friends. | In the survey students were asked how the transition to remote teaching and learning impacted their engagement and learning this semester and the response was:
7 promotors
21 passives
178 detractors.
(promotors classified as 9 or 10 out of 10, passives as 7 or 8 out of 10, detractors as 0 to 6 out of 10)

75% of respondents felt isolated as a student and not connected to the college or their course.
50% of respondents said they didn't feel like doing coursework at home. |

| Digital Skills/ CPD for Academics | It has given some staff an opportunity to try out online learning approaches for the first time and become acquainted with its possibilities.

Some practitioners lacked experience in assessment design and online assessment methodologies and would have welcomed more by way of guidance and examples. Also, as blended teaching and learning is likely to be an ongoing feature, providers have indicated that professional development for practitioners is required to enhance capacity. | A solid base of expertise and knowledge, accompanied by collaborative structures within and across institutions for sharing resources and good practice, is key to the rapid upskilling of students and staff.

Overall, it was acknowledged that the more knowledge and experience teachers and students have of related tools and approaches, the more choices are available to tailor the teaching and learning experience for student success. | In the academic staff survey lecturers said they required the following training for the academic year 2020/2021

Online course Design 45%
Blended Learning 54%
Moodle Basics 14%
Moodle Assessment 53%
Open-book exams 46%
Academic Integrity 33%
Adobe connect 34%
Panopto 31%
Accessibility 34%
UDL 30%
OER 33%
Learning analytics 27%

The institutes Centre for Online Learning (COL) and Centre for the Enhancement of Leaning and Teaching (CELT) deliver training in all of the above, primarily through a team of instructional designers. | Some students identified a lack of digital skills to engage with online learning and assessment. |

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

THEA (the Technological Higher Education Association) played a key role in facilitating cooperation among the institutes of technology – brokering agreements, constructively representing the institutes' interests to key stakeholders and facilitating effective communication. Meetings of the IOT Council of Registrars and other THEA network groups were held as frequently as necessary during the crisis. | 52.1% agreed 'My college provided me with effective and timely communication about the move to online teaching'. Although the majority of respondents agreed, most of the comments received through the USI survey, indicated a level of frustration at 'slow communication' from colleges, with others noting that online teaching about some modules was communicated more effectively than others. | Consistent, coherent, co-ordinated and considered communication is critical to successful collaboration and important for reducing stress among students and staff in times of uncertainty.

Where communication to students is developed in partnership between the institution and the students' union, there is greater clarity in the messaging. | It was agreed at an early stage that communication from the institute to students should come from a single source and would be issued only by the Registrar. | Learner feedback had multiple references to the importance of clarity and clear communication. In particular, learners drew attention to poor communication particularly around assessment and the lack of feedback on work submitted. |
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| Health and Wellbeing | | **Over a third (33.94%) of students feel that their mental health is worse as a result of COVID-19.**

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

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

(22.10%) of students would prefer to access face to face college and external mental health services (21.12%) than to access them through phone call, online or text services. | **In-person interaction was also seen as central to student and staff wellbeing**. As one person noted: 'The taken-for-granted little human interactions that occur in normal circumstances in our colleges are so important for our wellbeing and how we cope' | **Staff campaign feedback:** Overall one of the highest-ranking topics was staff workload, many staff members feel that online assessment demands greater consideration. Some staff feel that they have taken on responsibilities that were once facilitated by the examination's office. However, despite the unprecedented circumstances staff morale remains high with 86% of staff members agreeing that GMIT are 'commendable' for maintaining a positive attitude at this time. | 67% of teaching staff were unaware of the Inspire Wellbeing Employee Assistant program available to IT Sligo staff. | Some students feel isolated and it is important to ensure good and open communication.

Some students have found learning during this period to have been difficult and stressful. |

Fees, Finance & Accommodation	Over a third (36.69%) of respondents were not aware of the Student Assistance Fund in their college. Almost a third (29.18%) of students have lost employment as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Almost 3/5th (59.72%) of students are concerned, very concerned or extremely concerned about their ability to manage financially over the next year. Almost a quarter (23.77%) of students were unable to be released early from their accommodation contract.	While fees only appeared as a topic in 10 statements, it had a very high ranking as a topic within the overall conversation with three statements in the top 10 receiving considerable support (70% or more). These results show considerable tension amongst students about maintaining student fees at their current levels if remote learning persists for all of the next academic year.

Resources Supports & Access	Supporting the enhancement of remote and blended/hybrid teaching, learning and assessment will be an ongoing priority for institutions as will the need for online delivery of academic and professional support, care and guidance services to students and staff.	Peers, Staff, and College Resources were the main sources of support for students throughout the period.	It was pointed out that online/remote learning has great potential to mitigate educational disadvantage in the context of creating opportunities for equitable access and participation for all students. A number of people commented that programmes of study underpinned by the inclusive principles of Universal Design for Learning may offer greater equity of opportunity, participation, and outcome for all students.	The need for recorded lectures and online resource integration for remote learning to work productively is highlighted. - calls for live streaming of lectures - requests that PowerPoints used in lectures be available for download. - call for better use of Moodle, Teams and Outlook with a specific request for lecturer training in order to maximise the potential of these resources. - group work and peer reviews would be welcomed by students. Staff campaign feedback: There is a feeling among lecturers that students have adapted relatively well to online learning, although this issue is slightly divisive. It has been highlighted that 'vulnerable' students may be at risk and maintaining contact	58 of 206 respondents identified themselves as "a student with a confirmed diagnosis or a disability/ health condition" 43% of students surveyed said they had difficulties accessing the library 12% had difficulty accessing student health services.	Student feedback revealed that students with a disability did not have access to the same levels of support as pre Covid-19.

with students without face to face lecturers can be difficult. This relates closely to the topic of "student engagement" which ranked highest in terms of importance. Poor broadband among students is recognised as an ongoing concern. It was also noted that the 'group dynamic' will be missing among students.

Staff are in almost unanimous agreement that student engagement will be important for retention in the coming semester. Despite this consensus, there exists an emphasis on the   point that academic standards should not be neglected for the purpose of retention.

Return to Campus	Social distancing will continue to constrain tertiary education teaching, learning and	On return to campus, improve promotion of mental health services within colleges so all	Respondents advocated a blended approach to teaching, learning and	Many students advocated for on-campus learning in September (beyond	A week-long induction and orientation week for full-time students and part-time online

assessment modalities in 20/21. On-campus capacity will be reduced while COVID-19 remains a threat and some kinds of work placements may also be more difficult to secure. Choosing how to use onsite activity to best effect will be critical.	students are comfortable accessing services.	assessment, leveraging the strengths of different modes, while attending to the needs of discipline and context.	just practical subjects) and recommended: - The option to indicate preference for in-person or online lectures - Safety measures such as masks, handwashing, sanitizer, staggered timetables, temperature checks - Weekly staggering of class groups Staff campaign feedback: Overall, staff have demonstrated a strong level of adaptability given the circumstances, a proactive approach towards moving their teaching online, and a positive attitude considering the level of change that has taken place.	students was designed and developed to run from September 21st 2020.

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