
Blended Learning: Lessons learned from lockdown - we can never go back...but we have

Introduction

March 2020 will always be remembered as the time in which Ireland responded to the threat of the COVID 19 pandemic with societal restrictions to combat the spread of the virus. Practically all citizens felt the impact; some were required to work from home, while in some sectors, many became unemployed overnight. It was a period fraught with uncertainty and fear. Those engaging with tertiary education in Ireland did not escape the milieu of transition and anxiety that was widespread. Overnight, students and lecturers were forced to react to the many imposed challenges precipitated by the response to the threat of the pandemic. While the consequences of COVID 19 were disrupting all student's journeys through tertiary education in Ireland, those with a disability were arguably affected more than most.

One of AHEAD's strategic goals is to work with disabled students and learners to create inclusive environments in Further and Higher Education institutions, (AHEAD, 2019). As such, our research is aimed at identifying and responding to the challenges that regularly inhibit disabled students in tertiary education by using empirical evidence to change the learning experiences of disabled students and learners. Engaging with tertiary education is already considered to be more arduous for disabled students and the pandemic only served to create new barriers while simultaneously magnifying those already embedded in the system. From AHEAD's perspective, the onset of lockdown learning required an urgent inquiry into how students and learners with disabilities were negotiating what was fast becoming a very different learning landscape.

During this time, AHEAD published a range of research projects including three **Learning from Home** reports (AHEAD, 2020b, 2021a, forthcoming), a report entitled **How COVID-19 is Affecting Irish FET Practitioners and their Provision for Students with Disabilities**, (AHEAD, 2020a) and two annual **Students with Disabilities Engaged with Support Services in Higher Education in Ireland** surveys, (AHEAD, 2021b, 2022). Through this work and our continued commitment to engage with the AHEAD/USI Student Advisory Group, we were able to gather high-quality empirical evidence that formed an overview of the changing narratives of disabled students and learners both during and in the immediate aftermath of the period synonymous with the timeframe we called 'lockdown learning'.

The wider LINK Network, a European learning network, of which AHEAD is a part, has also led a discussion on what lessons can be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic about distance learning specifically for students with disabilities in higher education institutions. (LINK, October 2022)

Our research demonstrated that despite the pandemic presenting a myriad of challenges and difficulties for learners and educators, many innovative practices, processes and actions developed to address the extraordinary circumstances. As such, the pandemic forced the sector to re-consider accessibility, and the facilitation of flexibility and choice for learners. It brought to the fore barriers for many students which long existed but remained under-discussed by policymakers. In short, COVID required teachers/lecturers to re-imagine their teaching and learning practices. In doing so, some of the practices that were employed gradually became popular with the disability

Listening to the student experience of Learning from Home

This article is underpinned by the trio of **Learning from Home** reports that AHEAD published in 2020, 2021 and one forthcoming in 2023. In all reports, we explored topics such as coping, accessibility, well-being and the changes in learning format that emerged because of pandemic restrictions in colleges and centres. By using identical questions in what had now become regular reports, benchmarking, comparison and the tracing of students' attitudes and preferences became possible. By comparing these reports, it became clear that there was a distinct change in how students preferred to learn. The crisis had inadvertently created an ideal environment to explore the efficacy of ways to learn that had not been explored before, and also, how students felt about these different modes of learning, **with the benefit of actual, real-life experience**. Many students now had the experience of different ways of learning, from which they could now discuss their preferences, informed by how they navigated lockdown learning. The changing perspectives on how students desire to engage with their studies are potentially the most important outcome of AHEAD's pandemic research and policy work during this time. If any advantages are to be gleaned from COVID, it is surely this, as the benefits of choice and flexibility in how disabled students learn could now be evaluated with more confidence than ever before.

Initial Findings: Learning from Home 2021

Our initial Learning from Home report was published in May 2020, (AHEAD, 2020b). Many of the topics we explored have been mentioned above. Due to the urgency of examining how students and learners with disabilities were experiencing what was a challenging time for all students, this report was the shortest. The absence of any prior research and the unique nature of the study also precluded any comparison or benchmarking. As such, it was a brief inquiry into lockdown learning, and at the time, it was impossible to predict that two follow-up reports would be published.

It must be remembered that online learning was now the only mode of teaching and learning for all students. The report suggested that more than half of participants (52 percent) stated that they were not coping well with learning from home. Less than half, 42 percent, agreed with the statement that 'My lecturers/teachers have considered accessibility in the online learning materials they are providing me with'. The notable comments section that followed each chapter illustrates the difficulties students with disabilities were encountering due to the abrupt pivot to online learning.

I am at breaking point without the structure - 2 young children on my own, fighting fatigue from my auto-immune disease, 2 bald patches on the front of my hairline from my hair falling out. The feeling of being alone and abandoned. My lecturers have said we all have to adapt. No understanding. The pressure is unbearable.

I miss the structure of college and leaving work behind as well as the conversation with peers about assignments that can ease worries a lot. I still talk to my friends, but it is not the same.

While many were finding learning from home to be lonely and others had the added challenge of having children or being caregivers, others found that working from home was not an ideal environment for engaging with study due

to their home environment.

I use the kitchen table, it means books on and off the table all the time my back, neck and shoulders are killing me and the tension from the anxiety brought on by Covid has meant I am taking a lot more pain medication just to physically function.

Second Round: Learning from Home 2022

The following year, AHEAD undertook a further round of research to examine if students were still experiencing challenges with online learning, or if the experiences of students had improved to any degree.

With some participants now having experience of both online and on-campus learning, we could now explore which mode students preferred. When we examined accessibility, half found on-campus learning more accessible, while one-third found learning from home more accessible. Considering the accessibility of online materials, participants were asked their opinions on whether their teacher/lecturer had considered accessibility in their provision of remote learning materials. 47 percent of respondents reacted positively, and 28 percent negatively.

This second report demonstrated some improvement in students' experiences. Importantly, when participants were asked which mode of learning they preferred, 50 percent cited a preference for on-campus learning in the future, 29 percent preferred a blended approach and 9 percent reported a desire to continue to learn from home post-pandemic (2 percent answered 'other'). Again, the notable comments sections were indicative of a disillusioned cohort of students with many still struggling with online learning. While the study illustrated an improvement in coping, structure, motivation and accessibility, many of the same challenges were alluded to in the qualitative data.

Some lecturers have been better than others, allowing us to view (recorded) Zoom lectures after the live one has helped study. Most don't do this; some even hide sections of notes to encourage good live class attendance, but this adds another hurdle when trying to study.

Time on screen and sitting at computer has impacted my physical disability. Not being able to ask as many questions or interact with teachers has made some parts of learning difficult too.

However, the qualitative evidence did provide some evidence that some students were prospering while engaging with their courses from home.

Learning from home has worked really well for me in so many ways. Not having to travel to college on the days I feel the worst physically has meant I have missed far less classes than last year.

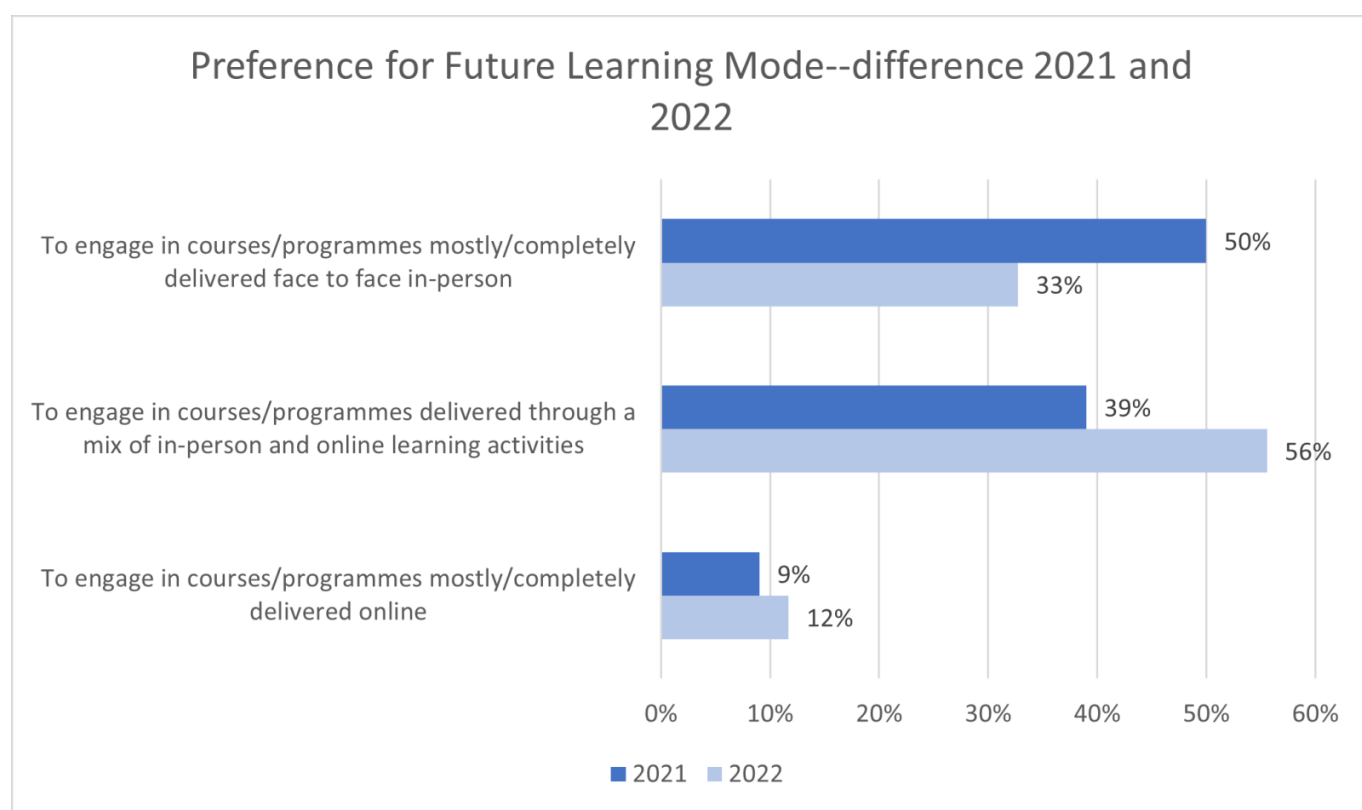
The law department in my university has made a very good effort to accommodate students. Some lecturers have amended their module assessments to better suit study from home while others have not. It would be ideal if lecturers could be consistent with this approach.

The emergence from lockdown learning in 2023

Students returned to full on-campus learning across tertiary Irish education at the start of the academic year 2022/23. Despite the end of lockdown learning, AHEAD believed that there were, and still are, many benefits to be taken from a period where many innovative practices, processes and actions were developed to address the extraordinary circumstances. Our research demonstrated that offering choice to students in how they engaged with their study was now possible.

The final **Working from Home** report aimed to analyse if choice would now become a reality in tertiary education, and with the benefit of experience, if students desired choice in how they learned.

This report asked which mode of learning students preferred. 33 percent of students now reported that they would prefer their course/programme to be delivered on-campus, 56 percent cited a preference for blended learning and 12 percent preferred to engage online. The changing preferences of students from the prior report are illustrated in the table below.



The significant 46 percent increase in students who now report a preference to engage in courses/programmes delivered through a mix of in-person and online learning activities is a notable finding which is likely indicative of the advantages of choice and flexibility that are synonymous with blended learning for disabled students.

However, when participants were asked if they were offered any choice in how they accessed their studies upon their return to their course, 55 percent of participants cited being offered 'no choice', 37 percent cited "some choice" and 8 percent stated they were offered 'full choice' in how they engaged with their classes/learning activities.

As such, a major finding that emanated from the pandemic, in particular concerning the learning narrative of disabled students, is arguably being forgotten. The data suggests a gradual, but distinct return to on-

What makes this more disappointing is the many accounts of participants who reported the advantages of blended learning for disabled students.

It made things a lot easier for me because it took the stress away that if the COVID numbers went back up, like I had grandparents and like my mother was a primary caretaker for them. So, like, if the numbers were too high, I didn't have to go in and add that stress to my life. Like, am I going to pass something on? And if I got sick, I didn't have to worry about going in. It was always recorded, and I could just see it whenever I was ready to watch it.

It seems like the university's attitude was that sort of universally face-to-face is better. And I disagree with that. And I've found going to campus quite challenging, in part because my eye condition is degenerative.

Conclusion

It has been suggested that the enforced transition to remote learning challenged traditional teaching practices that were considered **'sacrosanct until COVID-19 struck'** and **'may have opened eyes to new possibilities and challenged the necessity of some ingrained practices'** of what was previously perceived as normative practice by educators, (QOI, 2020, p. 4). However, the benefits and preference of blended learning and the choice and flexibility it enables for disabled students are now being overlooked, as tertiary education in Ireland appears to have returned to pre-pandemic, on-campus 'normality' of mostly on-campus learning.

The international report referred to at the beginning, to which AHEAD contributed, **We Can Never Go Back** (LINK Network, 2022), was co-written with members of organisations from around Europe, eight in all, who are all committed to achieving similar outcomes to AHEAD in their respective countries. As the participants discussed and debated the merits of blended learning, a disabled student announced

Remember, when you debate blended learning, you debate my right to education

Blended learning has the potential to help realise a number of rights instruments that aim to promote equal opportunities and conditions for disabled students in education. Internationally, these include, but are not limited to the UNCRPD, UN Sustainable Development Goals and the European Pillars of Social Rights. Nationally, disabled students are protected by the Public Sector Duty and Equality Legislation.

As such, the gradual abandoning of choice and blended learning is not simply a matter of preference. It extends to legal obligations and is key to creating inclusive environments for students with disabilities across tertiary education in Ireland. AHEAD will continue to amplify this call, to promote choice, flexibility and agency for those we represent.

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