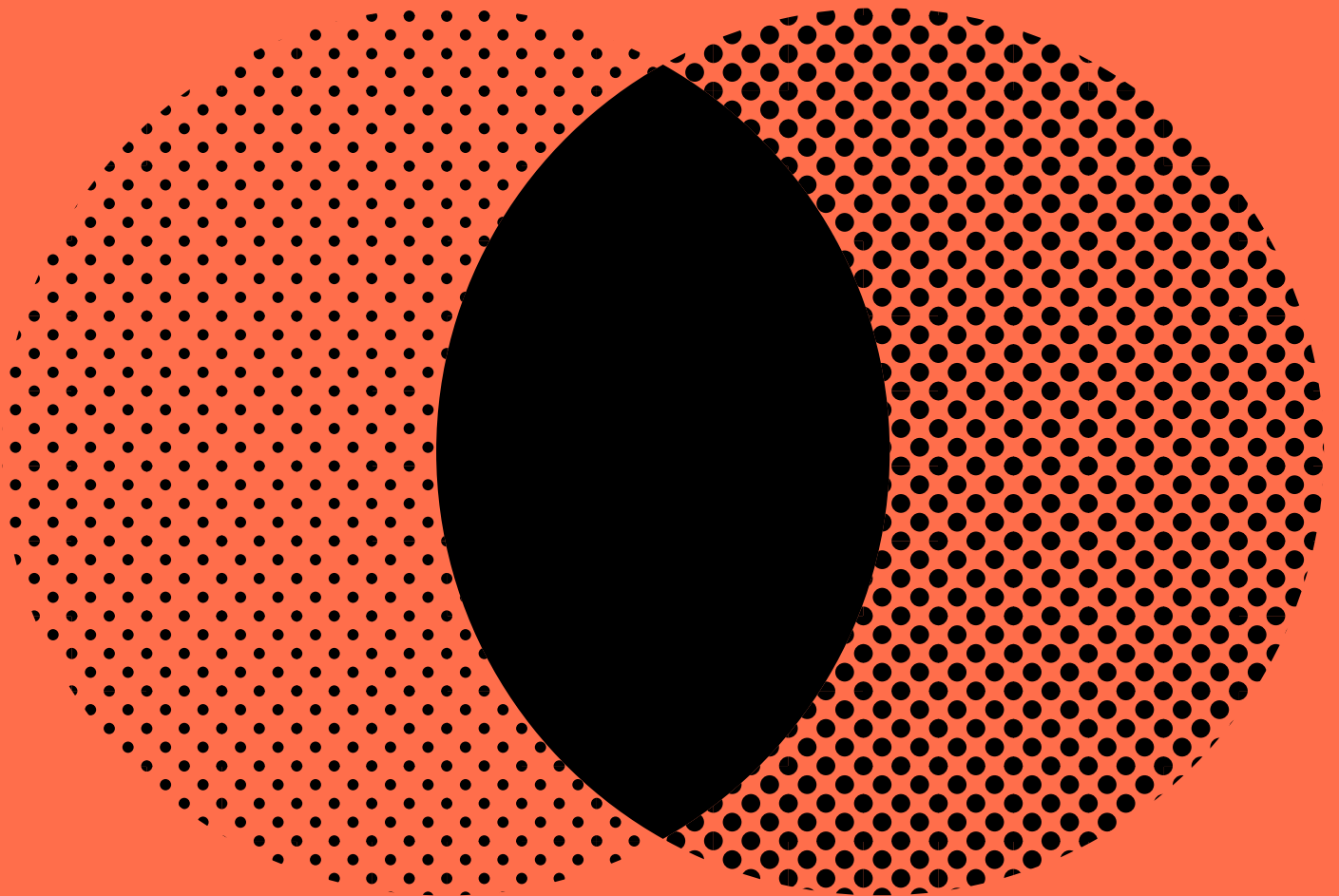


# Irish Survey of Student Engagement

## Results of qualitative data analysis projects

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Report 2 of 5





## Results of qualitative data analysis projects

**Name of Report:** A qualitative analysis of the 2020 StudentSurvey.ie dataset – what factors underpin student engagement in teaching and learning?

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### Foreword

The StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group is pleased to publish the results of five research projects analysing the qualitative data generated by the free-text response questions in StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie. The results contained within this report make up one part of this research series.

Five projects were funded by research bursaries offered by StudentSurvey.ie in October 2020. The aim of the bursary awards was to promote greater ownership and encourage wider use of the StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie data. Proposals for the analysis of the qualitative data emerging from StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie were invited from members of the research community within the participating institutions, as well as commercial data analysis companies. The projects were completed in May 2021.

Each project is an independent project undertaken by qualified and experienced researchers on behalf of StudentSurvey.ie. Each project took a unique approach. Some projects involved analysis of all the qualitative data for a given year(s), and some homed in on a subset of the data. Some undertook a qualitative methodology, while others applied quantitative methods to qualitative data. The commonalities between all five projects are that they all utilised well-grounded methodologies, offer mechanisms for replication of the analysis in future years, and are innovative and authentic.

These results are the first of their kind for StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie and we hope they are the first of many research projects involving the qualitative results of these surveys.

### What are StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie?

StudentSurvey.ie (the Irish Survey of Student Engagement) is an annual national survey of student engagement among first year undergraduate, final year undergraduate and taught postgraduate students in higher education institutions in Ireland.

PGR StudentSurvey.ie (the Irish Survey of Student Engagement for Postgraduate Research Students) is a biennial national survey of student engagement among Masters by Research students and PhD students in higher education institutions in Ireland.

Both surveys are designed to focus on student engagement, namely the amount of time and effort that students put into meaningful and purposeful educational activities, and the extent to which institutions provide such opportunities and encourage students to engage with them. The data collected reflect students' self-reported perceptions of their experiences.



**A qualitative analysis of the 2020 StudentSurvey.ie dataset – what factors underpin student engagement in teaching and learning?**

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Date: May 2021



## Foreword


The higher education ecosystem is changing at pace. In the past two decades alone, rapid advancements in technology, new student demographics, internationalisation, and overall sector growth have all combined to create a highly diverse and often complex system. It is not surprising that the means to promote and understand student engagement have also developed.

As our typologies of students and institutions become increasingly diverse, so too do our curricula. Similarly, the resulting options for the promotion of learning opportunities and participation in meaningful activities also widen. Central to any concept or theory of learning is the student. It is therefore fitting that the core value of the StudentSurvey.ie dataset is its broad coverage of the student body, and indeed the voice of the student.

This report focuses on a qualitative analysis of a portion of the 2020 (pre-pandemic) dataset. Our core objective was to apply a thematic analysis to interpret the overall student response in relation to: i)

what institutions are currently doing to promote engagement; and ii) what institutions could do to improve engagement in learning. Together, the analysis paints a picture of student engagement that has clear implications for stakeholders across the higher education system. The richness in some of the student feedback will, we hope, add to the development of innovative student engagement activities. Moreover, this qualitative analysis will ideally complement and contextualise the in-depth quantitative analyses on the 2020 survey.

We would like to extend our thanks to the wonderful team at StudentSurvey.ie for funding this research, and providing ample support and communication along the way. Finally, to all the students who provided insightful responses to the survey, we are most grateful.



As we hopefully enter a post-pandemic higher education space, there is much opportunity to leverage our knowledge on student engagement to foster positive and impactful change for us all.

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# Executive Summary


## Background

Student engagement in teaching and learning is of utmost importance to overall student development, progression, and a host of personal and professional outcomes. In Ireland, StudentSurvey.ie apply an annual self-report survey to focus on student engagement, including the amount of time and effort that students put into meaningful and purposeful educational activities, and indeed the extent to which institutions provide such opportunities and encourage students to engage with them. While there is a wealth of quantitative data available to provide insights into key trends and patterns, there is less qualitative analysis on student engagement.

## Why a qualitative analysis?

Qualitative data analysis allows researchers to rigorously capture a wide variety of contextual and personal factors within a given research project. Both subjective and objective patterns of data can be managed by qualitative methodologies, and qualitative research is highly amenable to representing the voice of those we are interested in studying. By capturing the in-depth, rich, open-ended and sometimes noisy data from humans in naturalistic settings, qualitative analysis can allow us to interpret key themes and participants' sense-making with respect to the given research questions. As many qualitative approaches (including thematic analysis) are theoretically flexible, they are especially suitable for the analysis of open-ended survey questions; and interpreting explicit and implicit meanings within both large and small datasets.

## Method



Qualitative thematic analysis was chosen due to its flexible yet rigorous approach to processing large amounts of qualitative data. The six-phases coding procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019) was applied to a representative sample from the 2020 dataset.


## **Summary of Results**

Two overarching and interconnected themes were interpreted from the representative student dataset: 1) Education as an interactive process; and 2) perceptions of support and stimulation. Both themes contained a rich set of subthemes to illustrate the overall factors underpinning student engagement within Irish universities.

### *Theme 1 - Education as an interactive process*

This global theme contained three subthemes: assessment and feedback types; supporting various learning formats; and communication characteristics. Overall, this theme represents the clear student preferences for different learning and assessment formats, styles, and communication strategies. There were major references to the facilitation of interactive learning formats (for example, group work; online-assistive technologies) and assessment formats (for example, continuous assessment) as being central to promoting and maintaining student engagement. Similarly, students highly valued the role of communications between themselves and their institutions, including module coordinators, staff and administration. However, to foster engagement in learning, critical to such communications was the need for structure, organised and clarified information (for example, learning outcomes within modules; or weekly emails to classes).

### *Theme 2 – Perception of support and stimulation*



This second global theme included two subthemes: wider sense of support and personal development; and practical services and activities across campus.

This themes provides insight into the broader perceptions of support and stimulation that may serve to support student engagement in teaching and learning, but that may not be specific to such environments. Students identified a wider sense of support on campus – for example, availability of space, facilities, services, free resources – as being helpful to not just their learning, but also their personal development. This theme also related to more holistic perceptions of support – students mentioned a sense of support being felt campus-wide or within a sense of community, peer interactions, diversity, and positive activities such as those within clubs and societies.

## **Conclusion**

Students expressed a clear preference for dynamic, interactive, flexible and well-organised learning activities, with helpful examples of different formats to support this. Additionally, it is important to consider the potential connection between student engagement in teaching and learning; and their broader perceptions of support and stimulation across the higher education space. Where there may be effective teaching formats in traditional environments such as the lecture theatre, these may not promote sustained student engagement in learning when there is a perception of a lack of broader support across campus in the form of facilities, resources, and personal development. A deeper understanding of the connection between these themes will be essential in future research and policy.

The overall findings from the qualitative analysis demonstrate the diversity of preferences within the representative student population, but with two clear overarching themes that structure these preferences.



The thematic findings also chime with other patterns found in prior StudentSurvey.ie reports (for example, Collaborative Learning, Supportive Environment, and Reflective and Integrative Learning). Taken together, this analysis will be of value to higher education stakeholders as the sector continues to reformulate approaches to ensure effective engagement in teaching and learning for students.




## Introduction

### Defining 'student engagement'

Today, understanding student engagement is a core focus of many policy-makers in higher education and indeed governments. The trajectory of change in understanding the broad definition of student engagement lies in the departure from measuring narrow or static constructs (such as contact time, limited behavioural outcomes, use of resources, and satisfaction scores) to building-in a measurable understanding of broader student experiences within a range of activities and conditions wherein high standards of learning and engagement can occur. Therefore, the concept of student engagement in teaching and learning goes far beyond the traditional classroom or lecture environment – it also encapsulates the more intrinsic involvement that students' have with their learning. This can relate to the broader student experience across campus, identity, peer group interactions, communications with the institution, and perspectives regarding the overarching higher education system. As such, it is now more commonly viewed as a proxy for higher quality teaching, and as a means to understand how to promote different forms of student involvement throughout the many different activities in higher education.

### A brief overview of the literature

To understand how the above definition of student engagement broadened over time – namely the past two decades – a non-exhaustive summary of key literature developments is provided. It should be noted however that the extant literature is both varied and containing mixed levels of evidence regarding the many outcomes associated with student engagement activities.




Moreover, there is a lack of high quality representative qualitative studies on the topic; and no dominant longitudinal body of research, nor definitive theoretical standpoint. There is also limited research that actively include students in the design and delivery of engagement-promoting activities. Therefore, criticisms about the depth of student engagement research endures due to this lack of theoretical coherence, and its adverse impact on the rigour of research (Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Zepke, 2018).

The complexity and variable nature of the literature is perhaps unsurprising given the multidimensional underpinnings to student engagement, and with that, the multidisciplinary interest in the concept. For example, Kahu (2013) posited that there are four key perspectives:

- 1) The behavioural – concerning student behaviour and the institutional practices
- 2) The psychological – examining the psychosocial processes that facilitate, promote, or impede student engagement
- 3) The socio-cultural – a consideration for the many socio-political, socio-economic and external factors that can influence engagement
- 4) The holistic – a combination of the preceding three perspectives

Indeed, much of these perspectives cover some of the earlier definitions of student engagement, namely time-on-tasks (Brophy, 1983; Merwin, 1969) or the quality of such efforts (Pace, 1980); right through to the broad conceptualisation of student engagement as utilised from the early 2000s onwards (Kuh & Umbach, 2004). Kahu (2013) provided a conceptual framework of engagement, its antecedents and consequences that situate both proximal and distal consequences for student engagement. Importantly, Kahu stressed the risk of constraining our understanding of student engagement if attempts were made to overly categorise variables for what is a complex concept that has deep temporal biases within the literature.




In order to gauge what is known about the evidential output from the student engagement literature, the evidence summary by Trowler and Trowler (2010) helpfully provides the following key findings:

- Student engagement improves (specific) outcomes; as does specific features of engagement
- The value of engagement is not challenged anymore
- Responsibility for engagement is shared
- Student engagement within university governance benefits the student representatives
- Student representatives on committees can be regarded as effective
- Where institutions are considered high-performing, they share best practice regarding student engagement in both governance and leadership
- Feedback questionnaires is the most common form of reporting student engagement
- Prior student characteristics do not necessarily predict student engagement
- Some students benefit more from engagement than others; and some students even experience engagement negatively
- Engagement requires successful transition

Owing to the absence of robustness and cross-study variability in terms of a shared understanding of student engagement as a concept, these findings should be interpreted with a degree a caution (Trowler & Trowler, 2010).


Given the salient characteristics implicit within the above findings on student engagement, the higher education sector has thus furthered the meaning of student engagement to better incorporate all aspects of the concept.



For example, in the United Kingdom (UK), the Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2013) has identified three components: 1) the individual student experience; 2) students as agents of change in learning and teaching; and 3) student participation in the HEA's strategy and work programme (Bryson, 2016). A more recent systematic review of students as partners in higher education has emphasised the importance of reciprocity in partnership, the need to situate this within the literature, a focus on smaller scale activities, and the need for more inclusive and partnered learning communities (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

Despite the advancing and broadening understanding of student engagement, there has been debate about whether there are more than the three components of affective (emotional), cognitive and behavioural (Jacquelynn S. Eccles, 2016). From a self-determination theoretical lens, an agentic form of engagement has been suggested as a fourth component (Reeve, Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012); with social engagement also within this domain (Fredricks, Filsecker, & Lawson, 2016). Although definitional clarity is lacking across both the research landscape but also within policy-making (J. S. Eccles & Wang, 2012), the mechanism for framing student engagement is better understood.

There is wide appreciation that motivation precedes engagement – the intent and underpinning factors that precede behaviour are considered to be motivational in nature; whereas student engagement is simply the manifestation of these antecedents in the form of observable behaviours (Bond, Buntins, Bedenlier, Zawacki-Richter, & Kerres, 2020; Reeve et al., 2012). Accordingly, a range of indicators are aligned with each of these components. However, somewhat problematically, different stakeholders interchangeably use terms such as motivation and engagement, or thinking and behaviour, with the respective indicators thus conflating concepts.



Such inconsistencies make it challenging to develop and iterate strong measures of student engagement that uphold conceptual clarity and multidimensionality (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). Nonetheless, these challenges also highlight the role of qualitative research in helping the field understand the experiences of student engagement.

### **StudentSurvey.ie – context and purpose**

The StudentSurvey.ie approach to operationalising the concept of student engagement is based on established international best practice approaches that have drawn upon some of the literature identified heretofore. For example, much of the survey questions used were modelled from comparable engagement surveys applied in Australasian and North American contexts (the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement – AUSSE, and the US National Survey of Student Engagement – NSSE). These engagement surveys apply a broad and holistic understanding of the wide concept of student engagement within their questions.

The AUSSE (2011), for example, operationally defines engagement as students' involvement in activities link with high quality learning; and recognise that students are in-part responsible for developing their knowledge, learning also comes from the staff and institutional conditions that foster student involvement (Radloff, 2011).

### **The present analysis**

Given the extensive range of factors identified in the literature on student engagement, and the absence of a universal theoretical model within which a dedicated coding frame could be drawn from, the present analysis opted for a data-driven inductive approach to a thematic analysis.



This approach can most appropriately interpret an overarching thematic structure to the two key open-ended questions of interest: 1) what do institutions in Ireland currently do best to engage students, and 2) what could they do to improve students' engagement.



## Method

### Design

The study incorporated qualitative data from undergraduate (first year and final year) and postgraduate taught students as part of the Irish Survey of Student Engagement. The use of qualitative data was beneficial in supporting the quantitative findings alongside examining the role of non-quantifiable features of student engagement.

### Participants

Participants for this study included students enrolled in a Higher Education institution in the Republic of Ireland. Table 1 presents the number and percentage of participants by various demographic characteristics. A total of 44,707 students responded to the qualitative section of the study, from which a representative sample of 20% was analysed ( $n = 8942$ ), based on the demographic characteristics of the 2020 StudentSurvey.ie national report. The randomisation function (RAND formula) within Microsoft Excel was used to randomly extract a 20% from the overall dataset – all data were compared with the 2020 report to ensure representativeness was achieved.

Table 1. Percentage of survey participants by various demographic characteristics

<b>Cohort</b>	
First Year Undergraduate	49%
Final Year Undergraduate	31%
Taught Postgraduate	20%
<b>Institution Type</b>	
Universities	50%
Technological Institutions	42%
Other Institutions	8%
<b>Mode of Study</b>	
Full-time	88%
Part-time	12%
<b>Programme type</b>	
Undergraduate Cert/Dip	6%
Undergraduate Ordinary Degree	10%
Undergraduate Honours Degree	65%
Graduate Certificate/Diploma	3%
Masters Taught	16%
<b>Field of Study</b>	
Generic Programmes and Qualifications	0.20%
Education	5%
Arts and Humanities	14%
Social Sciences, journalism and information	6%
Business, administration and law	22%
Natural sciences, mathematics, and statistics	10%
Information and Communication Technologies	9%
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	11%
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and veterinary	2%
Health and welfare	16%
Services	4%
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	60%
Male	40%
Undeclared	0.07%
<b>Age Group</b>	
23 and under	66%
24 and over	34%
<b>Country of Domicile</b>	
Irish Domiciled	86%
Internationally Domiciled	14%



## **Instrumentation**

Two qualitative questions were included in the survey: 1) What does your institution do best to engage students in learning? 2) What could your institution do to improve students' engagement in learning? Of the 8942 participants, 58.4% (n = 5223) responded to Question 1 and 54.4% (n = 4866) responded to Question 2.

## **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to identify dimensions of student engagement (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process followed the 6-step guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2006). Firstly, data were transferred to Microsoft Excel, and read and re-read to establish overall familiarity. Secondly, an initial coding of keywords and sentences was applied to the dataset. Thirdly, all codes were then organized within draft themes and sub-themes. Fourthly, a thorough review and revision of themes was implemented. The fifth step involved the utilisation of an online whiteboard tool (Miro) to visualise themes in order to facilitate the definition and naming of both themes and relevant subthemes by both authors (DMC and CB). Lastly, a full write-up of each theme and subthemes occurred, with continued reference to raw data to ensure richness and originality of the student voice was represented throughout.

## Results

Two main global themes were interpreted from the overall data: 1) *education as an interactive process*; and 2) *perception of support and stimulation*. Theme 1 focused specifically on direct learning outcomes whereas Theme 2 focused on factors outside of the classroom which indirectly affected learning. Each theme contains several subthemes as presented in Figure 1.

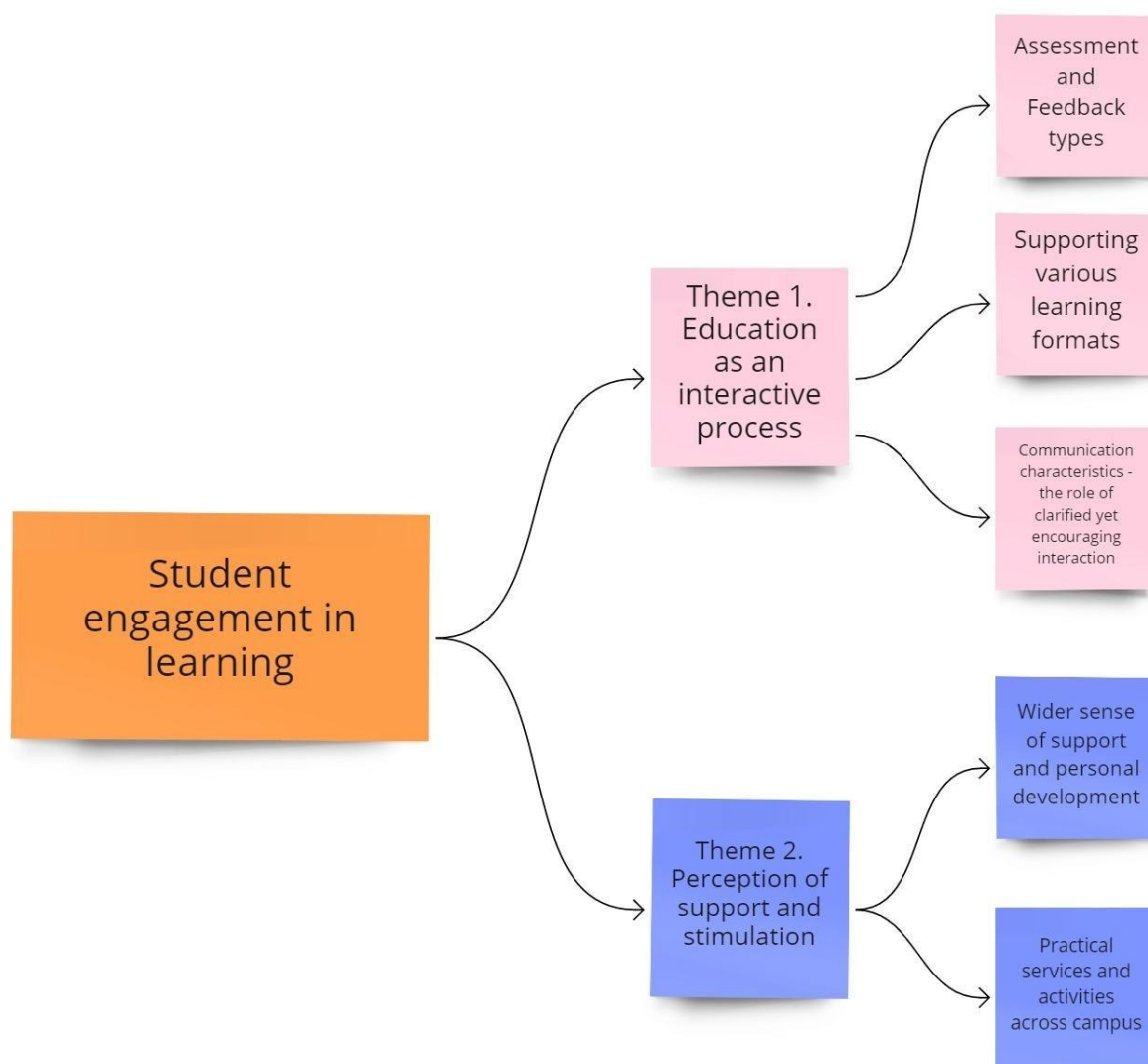


Figure 1. Thematic map of predominant themes and respective subthemes



## Theme 1: Education as an interactive process

This global theme contained three subthemes: assessment and feedback types; supporting various learning formats; and communication characteristics. Overall, this theme represents the clear student preferences for different learning and assessment formats, styles, and communication strategies. There were major references to the facilitation of interactive learning formats (for example, group work; online-assistive technologies) and assessment formats (for example, continuous assessment) as being central to promoting and maintaining student engagement. Similarly, students highly valued the role of communications between themselves and their institutions, including module coordinators, staff and administration. However, to foster engagement in learning, critical to such communications was the need for structure, organised and clarified information (for example, learning outcomes within modules; or weekly emails to classes).

### *Subtheme 1: Assessment and feedback types*

Students reported assessments as an important factor when engaging with learning. They generally favoured continuous, formative assessment rather than summative, end-of-year examinations: *“continuous assessment ... keeps the class engaged more frequently and puts less stress on the exams”*. Students valued consistency throughout the academic year, asking institutions to *“spread the course load out more over the semester”* and emphasised that *“continuous assessments through[out the] semester ensure you must engage with course work at an early stage rather than waiting until semester end and cramming.”* Further to this, students emphasised the importance of feedback from academic staff as a crucial element in keeping them engaged with their course because it allowed them to maintain motivation and understand where to improve: *“Provide feedback after assignments or exams as it is crucial to learn from mistakes and improve. Everyone is busy and it might take up a lot of time but even the smallest amount of feedback is extremely useful”*.



### *Subtheme 2: Supporting Various Learning Formats*


Students felt that they could engage fully with learning when it was treated as an interactive process. They valued variety in their learning, asking for institutions to *“change it up a bit. Sitting down listening to long drawn out lectures is tiring and gets very boring”*.

Amongst the various learning formats, students valued: online learning, technology-supported learning, problem-based learning, external guest speakers, groupwork, and incentivised learning to name but a few. Students felt that it was important that they were able to become actively involved in the process of learning and appreciated a hands-on approach: *“Instead of lecturers reading directly from PowerPoint slides, maybe have students engage in activities directly associated with the topics”*. The data suggested that students need an element of inclusivity and responsibility in their learning in order to feel fully engaged.

Within this desire for variety, students wanted to feel that their learning was relevant to their future careers, noting a desire for *“real life experiences”*, *“career-focused activities”* and to *“apply the work we do in class to situations in a workplace”*. This practical engagement was regarded as important by providing students with first-hand real world experiences. Some participants noted that they felt motivated after guest speakers attended the institution to speak about post-graduation pathways.

### *Subtheme 3: Communication Characteristics*

Another aspect of the ebb-and-flow component of education as an interactive process is communication. Students noted the importance of feeling in control and being fully aware of what was expected of them. Communication ensures consistency and structure and gives students a certain level of guidance. This was illustrated by particular responses that highlighted the importance of a *“clear plan and perfect communication system”*.




Another response noted that *“effective road-mapping and cohesive structure of modules”* was what institutions did best to engage students in learning, or primed them to be ready for engagement.

Staff play a key part in this communication process and, in turn, play a fundamental role in ensuring students remain focused and engaged: *“Some lecturers are very committed to their area of expertise and have a passion for it which [makes] the learning process a lot easier”*. However, there were some responses that indicated a negative experience: *“the biggest complaint is that ... the college is very disorganised. It is impossible to get any reply from staff above lecturer level and I find it very frustrating.”* Having accessibility to staff is essential to prevent students from becoming overwhelmed and disengaged. Many students were satisfied with their level of access and felt that their institution should *“continue to support students through open door policy”*.

Students appreciated a level of guidance – for example, one respondent asked for *“more effective communication regarding what is expected of students: learning outcomes, deadlines etc. are often misaligned with other modules”*. Finally, some respondents underscored the importance of clear notifications and a sense of being organized: *“be more organised about scheduling classes and give better notifications”*.

## **Main Theme 2: Perception of Support and Stimulation**

This second global theme included two subthemes: wider sense of support and personal development; and practical services and activities across campus. This theme provides insight into the broader perceptions of support and stimulation that may serve to support student engagement in teaching and learning, but that may not be specific to such environments.




Students identified a wider sense of 3 supports on campus – for example, availability of space, facilities, services, free resources – as being helpful to not just their learning, but also their personal development. This theme also related to more holistic perceptions of support – students mentioned a sense of support being felt campus-wide or within a sense of community, peer interactions, diversity, and positive activities such as those within clubs and societies.

*Subtheme 1: Wider Sense of Support and Personal Development*

The data illustrated that students appreciated a sense of support and safety surrounding their learning experience. Students felt that a sufficient support network and resources around them enabled them to cope with the challenges of student life, and thus their overall engagement in learning. Students used terms such as “family” and “community”, indicating that it was important that they view themselves as having a sense of belonging and value (*“everyone helps each other out and there are lots of opportunities for collaborative and active learning”*).

Students wanted to feel that they are valued and respected in their institution. One response stated that they liked the fact that their institution would *“communicate with [us] like people and not a separate student entity”*. Students also valued opportunities to give feedback to their institution and to feel heard. When asked what the institution does best to engage students in learning, one respondent said: *“listening to students’ interests, and being open to students’ views. I have found that accommodating approach, which fosters mutual respect, to be highly beneficial for my engagement in learning”*.

Students welcomed the feeling that they have control over their time at the institution and liked a balanced study/life approach. This helped them to feel that their personal lives were equally as important as their study lives.




For example, one respondent said that institutions should *“acknowledge that students have more going on than college, e.g. part-time jobs, mental health issues, pressure, placement”, and should “look at the student as a whole”*. They were particularly keen on having more support from staff, requesting that they *“check in with students to see how they’re doing”*.

Students wanted to feel comfortable in their learning space, with many students favouring tutorial-style small classes rather than large lecture halls. This promoted a feeling of engagement with their tutor and peers, and reduced the feeling of intimidation: *“I feel it would be good to hold more tutorials for smaller section groups of the course as it can be harder to get support or help/ask question being in a large group of around 100 students.”*

Finally, students highlighted the role of peer support. The dataset continuously noted group work and the facilitation of discussions with their fellow students as key factors to positive engagement. One respondent said that *“encouraging students to work in groups is an interesting way to discover different perspectives”*. Another student valued it as a method to make new friends, saying *“college can be tough when you do not have friends”*. It is clear that students find it helpful when institutions facilitated opportunities for support networks to form, as summarised by one respondent who said that if their institution provided more opportunities for peer interaction, it *“would create an environment where you actually want to go to college to learn and hang out with people you know”*.

#### *Subtheme 2: Practical services and activities across campus*

Further to the sense of support, students highlighted the role played by physical services on campus, such as support services. Responses indicated that they wanted a space to seek out help: *“have a space where people struggling with their course ... can feel comfortable to discuss their concerns”*.




This desire for supports came in the form of healthcare, wellbeing promotion, and financial supports. There were reports of negative experiences in accessing healthcare on campus, noting that there was a need for greater availability of one-to-one services (*“it’s all so busy and booked up, it can be difficult to access the services”*).

This is reflected in a number of responses that highlighted concern about the available capacity, to the extent that some felt that universities should *“lower the number of students being accepted into the college or increase the facilities available”*. Another respondent requested *“more mental health supports to ensure we aren’t so overwhelmed that we cannot engage”*.

While students valued wellbeing and health services, others felt that learning support was an essential facet in engagement. Responses indicated that students widely appreciated learning support centres such as academic writing centres, libraries, and maths centres. Students also valued the signposts to learning support opportunities, as responses indicated that their institution encouraged engagement by *“providing academic supports and making them clearly known to students”*. By providing on-campus learning support services, students felt more confident in their studies and were able to positively engage with their course.

Extracurricular activities also helped students to engage with learning. One respondent said: *“with so many events taking place on campus every day there is almost always a reason to go into college, even when you’re not motivated by your classes”*. This means that once students are on campus anyway, they will be more likely to engage in their classes.



Extracurricular activities created an incentive to attend campus and encouraged students to attend learning activities (*“due to the societies I was involved in...I think encouraging students to do extracurricular activities will be beneficial for students when it comes to learning for their modules”*). By providing extracurricular events, students felt that their learning extended beyond the classroom, and they become engaged with their institution as a whole.

A full set of illustrative quotations is provided in Table 2 to support the preceding thematic descriptions.

*Table 2. Supporting quotation across each theme and subtheme*


<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Illustrative Quote</b>
Theme 1: Education as an interactive process	Assessment and Feedback Types	<p>“Assignments ... help motivate students to get work done and helps the information sink in”</p> <p>“Provide more feedback and share general feedback on previous work. This would encourage students to work more on improving themselves and engaging more with other materials suggested by lecturers.”</p>
	Supporting Various Learning Formats	<p>“[the college] makes the material relevant to students and provides assignments and lectures which actually help prepare us for working life and exams”</p> <p>“As an institution, I would love to see an emphasis on the diversification of assessment and learning styles.”</p>
	Communication Characteristics	<p>“We were confused for the first term about what all we needed to accomplish, which detracted from our focus on our studies, so being clearer from the get-go could help”</p> <p>“I feel that if I was told at the beginning of the academic year exactly how many exams I have to sit, what assignments are going to be due etc. and what level will I need to achieve in these in order to pass the year and progress through to the next semester or year it would give me a greater level of confidence if I was receiving this information from the right source.”</p>
Theme 2: Perception of Support and Stimulation	Wider Sense of Support and Personal Development	<p>“They seem to be genuinely empathetic to people’s circumstances and challenges as well as providing opportunities for social interaction and fun”</p> <p>“College can be tough when you do not have friends”</p>
	Practical Services and Activities Across Campus	<p>“I think encouraging students to do extracurricular activities will be beneficial for students when it comes to learning for their modules. Doing things other than just studying can help students with applying real life problems etc. to their topic of study.”</p> <p>“The University ... puts massive emphasis on getting students to join different societies and engage in new thinking. Also with so many events taking place on campus every day there is almost always a reason to into college, even when you're not motivated by your classes”</p>



## Discussion

This report applied qualitative thematic analysis to the open-ended questions within the 2020 StudentSurvey.ie dataset (pre-pandemic). Two global themes were interpreted from the data: 1) *education as an interactive process*; and 2) *perception of support and stimulation*. The first theme contained three important subthemes: *assessment and feedback types*; *supporting various learning formats*; and *communication characteristics*. Similarly, the second theme had two subthemes of interest: *wider sense of support and personal development*; and *practical services and activities across campus*. Taken together, the overarching thematic map – as illustrated in Figure 1 and supported by quotation in Table 2 – provide rich qualitative insights into the many factors that students themselves report as being either helpful or unhelpful to their engagement. Before exploring these results further, it is imperative to note that qualitative thematic analysis aims to provide deep and nuanced understanding into subjective experiences; and is thus not amenable to quantitative interpretations. The totality of the data analysis in this report should be interpreted as a broad thematic framework to understand the qualitative experiences of students within the (pre-pandemic) 2020 higher education environment.


Looking closer at the first theme – *education as an interactive process* – provides helpful insights that contextualise some of the trends seen in earlier StudentSurvey.ie reports. In the first instance, it is interesting to note the value students placed on the facilitation of collaborative learning, student-faculty interactions and the quality therein – all key indicative datapoints seen within the literature also. The spectrum of the underpinning subthemes also highlight the behavioural, cognitive, emotional, and agenic/social components of student engagement which have been debated in the literature (Reeve et al., 2012).



For example, the subtheme of *assessment and feedback types* detailed the many different preferences; but with a clear favouring of continuous assessment and constructive feedback. Connected with this was the demand for various forms of interactive learning formats (subtheme two), such as group work, real-world practical exercises, and technology-assisted learning. The interactive element to these formats potentially serves both agency and socialability within students; but also builds transferrable skills for future professional environments.

Students also identified these interactive elements as promoting not just independence, but independence of thought by way of critical thinking. This interactive ingredient is crucial to consider, because the current measurements of student engagement have been identified as unsuitable for critically appraising interactivity and its change over time (Fredricks & McColsky, 2012).

However, the final subtheme of *communication characteristics* demonstrated that clarified yet encouraging information was necessary to promote a variety of behaviour (for example, participation, independent study, utilising learning resources). This subtheme also illustrated the integral role of not just staff (i.e. lecturers or teaching assistants), but also wider higher education staff and institutions at large (administrators, university-wide weekly emails). The clarity and organisation of information implicit in such communications (or lack thereof) appeared to facilitate or even influence the motivational antecedents to basic student engagement behaviours. This is an important consideration for stakeholders to digest – even when innovative and dynamic teaching and learning approaches are embedded, student engagement may be predicated on the effective communication strategies that surround such teaching and learning.




Turning to the second theme – *perception of support and stimulation* – allows us to see the broader higher education ecosystem, and its intrinsic connection to the student engagement process. Unlike the first theme, this second global theme identified the many extracurricular or campus-wide features of the student experience that may influence student engagement. Interestingly, these may not be immediately interpreted as integral to specific teaching and learning outcomes. As per the conceptual debates outlined in the introduction section, students in this analysis clearly expressed the need for a *wider sense of support and personal development* (subtheme one); and *practical services and activities across campus* (subtheme two). Outside of the traditional teaching and learning environments, students derive value from the perception of feeling supported, being able to participate in extracurricular activities that promote peer interaction and thus support, and also develop personally. That students would connect this to the overall engagement in teaching and learning serves to underline a significant component of the overall student experience.

Despite the integral connection between the domain of teaching and learning, and the domain of wider support services and personal development, these areas are often addressed independently at both a conceptual and policy-making level. These findings corroborate more recent literature that point to the agenic-social component to student engagement (Fredricks et al., 2016; Reeve et al., 2012); and again bring into focus the complex multidimensionality to this concept.

### **Strengths and limitations**

The 2020 StudentSurvey.ie dataset was a large, representative and insightful resource that can generate multifaceted insights into the student population in Ireland. This qualitative analysis benefitted from being able to extract a representative sample from the overall dataset.




The response rate to the two open-ended questions analysed was between 54-58%. While this is still a strong return, there remains a significant portion of respondents who choose not to provide insights. This non-response may itself be attributable to a form of disengagement, but no definitive insights can be drawn. A further concern is that the open-ended questions, while useful and insightful, were encased within a larger survey. It is unclear if the same thematic structure would have been found had a series of interviews and focus groups been conducted with a representative sample. Finally, more broadly, the lack of theoretical and conceptual unity across the field meant that a systematic literature review was not feasible as had been originally planned. Consequently, an evidence-based coding framework could not be reliably applied to the dataset.

### **Recommendations and concluding remarks**

Based on the qualitative findings in this report, stakeholders within the higher education system in Ireland can consider the following points of recommendation:

- Advance the mixed methodological approach to measuring the concept of student engagement; and track this over time
- Embed students in the design and iteration of proposed engagement activities
- Support higher education institutions to diversify their range of interactive learning formats, and continuous assessments; and build-in mechanisms to gauge student feedback
- Critically compare institutional communication strategies and their effects on student engagement
- Ensure that policies reflect the connection between teaching and learning components of student engagement, and wider perceptions of support and stimulation

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- Consider the further use and development of psychoeducational materials to highlight to students the importance of wider higher education engagement, such as extracurricular activities and peer support programmes


As the higher education environments consider the post-pandemic scenarios likely to manifest in the coming months and years, it is important to note the progress made in understanding the multidimensional concept of student engagement. What is clear is that the impacts of the pandemic will likely accentuate some of the needs highlighted in this report for addressing student engagement in a broad and holistic manner; particularly with respect to: supporting adaptability, updating learning and curricula formats, upskilling stakeholders with technological tools, and ensuring wider flexibility without risking student disengagement (Farnell, Skledar Matijevic, & Šcukanec Schmidt, 2021).

To conclude, of utmost importance in supporting the advancement of student engagement best practices should be the embeddedness of the student voice throughout the research and policy lifecycle. Our continued progress towards a more conceptually valid and evidence-based approach to student engagement – utilising a variety of methodologies – will ultimately serve to enrich the student experience into the future.

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