

Article Two

#ACATHINKS

APRIL 2022



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Sharon is a successful hybrid academic with more than 25 years of experience working in higher education in Ireland. Before joining the IUA she was the Assistant Director at the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching at NUI Galway, where she focused on academic staff development and led a team of learning technologists. She has been an Associate of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and a member of the Professional Development Expert Advisory Group.

## Digitalisation in International Higher Education

What are the challenges facing staff who teach?

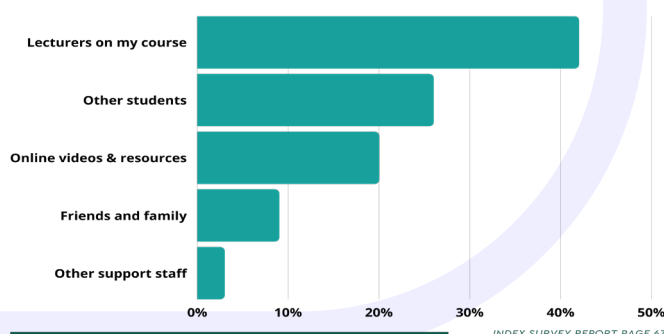
*Digital transformation of Higher Education is not possible without supporting the development of digital competences of all staff who teach or support learning.*

### HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on staff who teach in our universities. In the immediate months following lockdown, teaching staff were thrown into emergency remote teaching. They had to adjust to using any available tools and technologies to move their teaching online, while managing their own personal lockdown situations, as well as dealing with a huge amount of concern for their students. To put this into some perspective, the [Irish National Digital Index \(INDEX\) survey of staff who teach](#), which took place in November 2019, just months before the start of the pandemic, shows that 70% of staff had never taught in a live online environment. Moving to remote teaching and assessment, therefore, was a huge challenge and one which was navigated fairly successfully and under immense pressure.

Students, as we know, also struggled during this time. Before the pandemic, according to the results of the INDEX survey findings, students' most likely source of digital support for learning was lecturers on their courses, and the next most likely source of digital support was 'other students'.

#### WHO SUPPORTS YOU MOST TO USE DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN YOUR LEARNING?



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This suggests that during the pandemic students relied on their lecturers to support them in their new ways of online learning, further adding to the workload experienced by teaching staff.

By the start of the academic year in Autumn 2020, it had become clear that teaching would be wholly online, and teaching staff were supported by their institutions and through national projects such as [Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning \(EDTL\)](#) to make the most of available technologies to provide a better, more effective remote learning experience for students.

For the most part, lecturers attempted to move their classroom-based approaches to the virtual environment, rather than embrace fully online learning. The experience was not, according to the ongoing rhetoric, a happy one for staff or students, and there has been much written about online learning as a poor relation to on-campus and in-person learning.

One year later, in the Autumn of 2021, campuses were opening up again, with protocols for social distancing, mask wearing and ongoing Covid testing in place. In many ways, this period has been even more challenging for teaching staff, as they attempt to deal with ongoing infections and isolation periods for themselves, their families and for students. They have had to teach on campus, while still being expected to cater for students not on campus, using some form of hybrid approach. [While the message has been that students want to be back on campus](#), in reality staff are now concerned about the low attendance rates at traditional lectures.

## CHALLENGES FACING STAFF WHO TEACH IN HIGHER EDUCATION

As we emerge from the second full academic year since the start of the pandemic, there are many opportunities for institutions to embrace a digital transformation in higher education, to use the experiences of the past to enhance digital teaching practices and create a better learning environment for all students. Addressing the needs and development of academic staff, and all those who support student learning, is essential to initiate change and cultivate new practices.

But there are a number of challenges facing staff who teach in higher education.

### Burnout and Exhaustion

Staff and students are exhausted, after two years of remote, online and hybrid teaching and learning. While many staff have learned new digital skills and found new

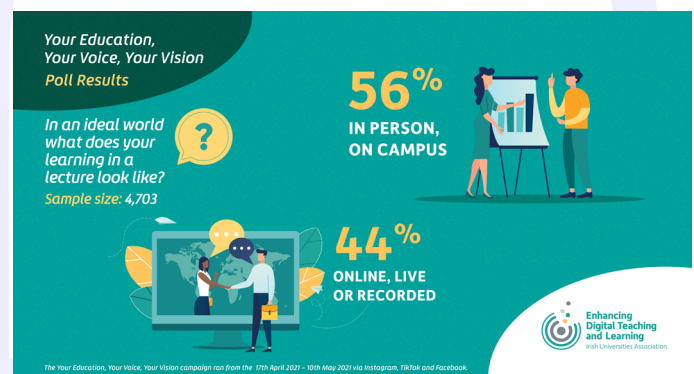
ways of using these to enhance the learning of their students, there is an overwhelming desire to "return to normal". For many staff this means a return to lecture halls and campus-based activities. Digitally enhanced teaching has been conflated with a poor version of online teaching, and the message has been that this is too much effort and doesn't work. Is it any wonder, then, that so many staff just want things to go back to the way they were?

The main mode of teaching currently is on-campus, and staff are moving away from "blended" approaches, partly in response to the perception that current low levels of engagement are related to availability of online materials. In fact, twenty-five years ago, low levels of engagement were attributed to availability of printed handouts, and ten years ago to availability of downloadable presentation files from the virtual learning environment (VLE). This is not a new phenomenon.

### Students' Expectations have Changed

On the other hand, students' expectations of how learning can work in higher education have changed. Prior to the pandemic, the results of the INDEX survey show that the digital tool found most useful by staff and students was the VLE, and that universal, effective and consistent use of the VLE was one of the top requests by students for improving their experience of digital teaching and learning.

In the [Your Education, Your Voice, Your Vision Campaign](#) (April – May 2021) students across Irish higher education were asked to project themselves into the post-pandemic future and imagine their ideal learning experience. While there is no doubt that students want a campus-based experience, they don't want to be on campus full time. When asked "in an ideal world, what does your learning in a lecture look like?" 44% of respondents indicated that they would like to continue to learn from online lectures, whether they are live or recorded sessions. Three quarters of respondents did not see themselves back on campus full time, but rather 1–3 days each week.



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The changing demographic of participants in higher education means that students have an increased need for flexibility in how they learn. Students are often parents with young families or other caring responsibilities. They have jobs, long commutes to campus, high rents, unsuitable accommodation, or other financial, physical or time barriers.

The results of the Your Education, Your Voice, Your Vision Campaign demonstrate a demand for increased blended learning opportunities to support a more diverse range of students. There is a preference for face-to-face interactions, and the results emphasise the importance of campus for interpersonal interaction. A blended learning model allows for flexibility and personal responsibility for students in their learning, while also providing opportunities for students to engage and interact in person with classmates and teaching staff.

Meeting students' needs and expectations for a more flexible learning experience is, however, a big challenge for individual members of academic staff. Given existing workloads and high student numbers, teaching staff have limited capacity to develop additional digital approaches.

### Changing Needs for Staff Development

The [European Framework for the Digital Competence of Educators](#) (DigCompEdu) describes what it means for educators to be digitally competent. The focus of the framework is not on digital skills, but rather on how digital technologies can be used to enhance teaching and the student learning experience. It details 22 competences, organised into six areas, including professional and pedagogic competence areas, and facilitating learners' digital competence.

The DigCompEdu framework highlights a number of challenges for developing the digital competences of teaching staff in higher education, in the context of digital transformation.

First, while many staff have been forced to learn new digital skills, such as how to run a live online teaching session, the objective has mostly been to replicate the classroom experience in a remote environment. In other words, the focus of the last two years has been on how to use the technology and tools, rather than how to enhance teaching. Academic staff, already exhausted, have not had time to reflect on what worked well for them, or even how they have developed their own personal capabilities.

Time, for reflection and consolidation, has always been a challenge for professional development of academic

staff. It is not always adequately valued or recognised. Moreover, staff need to see a clear return on investment of valuable time, if they are to engage in staff development activities. Time invested in other academic activities, such as research, has more obvious and tangible rewards.

Secondly, professional development in areas of digital capacity has to be continuous. DigCompEdu describes six levels along which an educator's digital competence may develop, from Newcomer through to Pioneer. The framework provides a structure within which an academic can map themselves, and map where they want to be. Not every educator needs to be a Pioneer, or even an Expert, for every competence, but there is always more to learn and more to try.

The challenge then, for staff development, is how to provide ongoing opportunities for teaching staff to engage in development. The Professional Development Framework of the Irish National Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education provides a [typology of Professional Development Activities from Accredited \(formal\) programmes through Structured, Unstructured, and Collaborative informal activities](#).

Over the last two years, it is clear that staff have less time for formal accredited programmes of study, but have engaged with both Structured and Unstructured professional development activities offered through institutional centres for learning and teaching (or similar). As campus activity has increased, it is becoming apparent that teaching staff are benefiting from the discussions about teaching and learning that happen within informal communities of practice, often based around an academic discipline or programme team.

## WHAT'S AHEAD

What is needed now to ensure that we don't revert to pre-pandemic practices of teaching and learning and instead learn from and build upon the gains of the last few years?

### Leadership and Vision

Digital transformation of higher education requires leadership and commitment to change. This is important at senior management level within an institution, but also important for leadership in teaching at a discipline or programme team level. Leaders at all levels are needed to articulate a vision for digitally enhanced teaching and learning, to create spaces for conversation, and to seek ways to recognise and support staff development for digital transformation.

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### Common Language

Remote teaching, online teaching, hybrid, hyflex, flexible and blended teaching are all terms that are increasingly being used to mean different things in different contexts, causing a lot of confusion and conversations at cross purposes. A simple, [common framework](#), such as that described by Sue Beckingham, needs to be adopted at institutional level so that management, students and all staff can be confident they are talking about the same thing.

### Community Approaches to Teaching and Staff Development

The Irish National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning recognises that disciplines are often the key unit of change in higher education. Individual teaching staff have limited capacity to develop additional digital teaching approaches. But teaching teams that include a blend of roles such as academics, learning designers, learning technologists, and librarians, all working together, have the potential to make a huge difference to the learning environment. Combining their skills and expertise has the potential to transform teaching within a discipline or across an academic programme, similar to the team approaches used in successful online education. Moreover, through working together in this way, informal communities of practice are established, potentially leading to effective approaches to staff development through peer learning.

### Student Partnership

Teaching teams, in this sense, will also benefit from having authentic student partnership. During the pandemic there was a sense that students were really being listened to, their experiences being taken on board as staff struggled to understand the impact of Covid-19 on the learning environment. More recently, in the rush to get back to normal, students' experiences are taken as being understood. However, a number of recent initiatives demonstrate that by going beyond student surveys and student feedback there is an opportunity to really benefit from student partnerships. By actively involving students in the curriculum development process, and providing an avenue through which they can share their learning needs, students can articulate their learning experiences and thoughts, not otherwise captured until after the fact.

*In conclusion, if institutions are to embrace a digital transformation in higher education, there needs to be an acknowledgement that staff who teach and support learning have an essential role to play. After two years of teaching during a pandemic, staff are experiencing a number of challenges including burnout, changing student demographics and expectations, as well as evolving models of staff development. To address these, leadership and vision is required, as well as spaces for conversation, collaboration and community approaches, involving students as active partners.*

This article is part of the "**ACA Think Pieces**" series on digitalisation, launched in March 2022. The contributions in this series explore the multi-faceted nature of digitalisation in higher education institutions from an international cooperation perspective. They take under consideration current challenges at various levels, local/national/regional and European higher education policies supporting digitalisation and practical examples of digitalisation infrastructures, effective support services for virtual and/or blended mobilities and development of intercultural competences in a digital environment etc. Articles are authored by expert colleagues on the digitalisation of HE field, and are published electronically on ACA's website, monthly, from March until the end of 2022.