



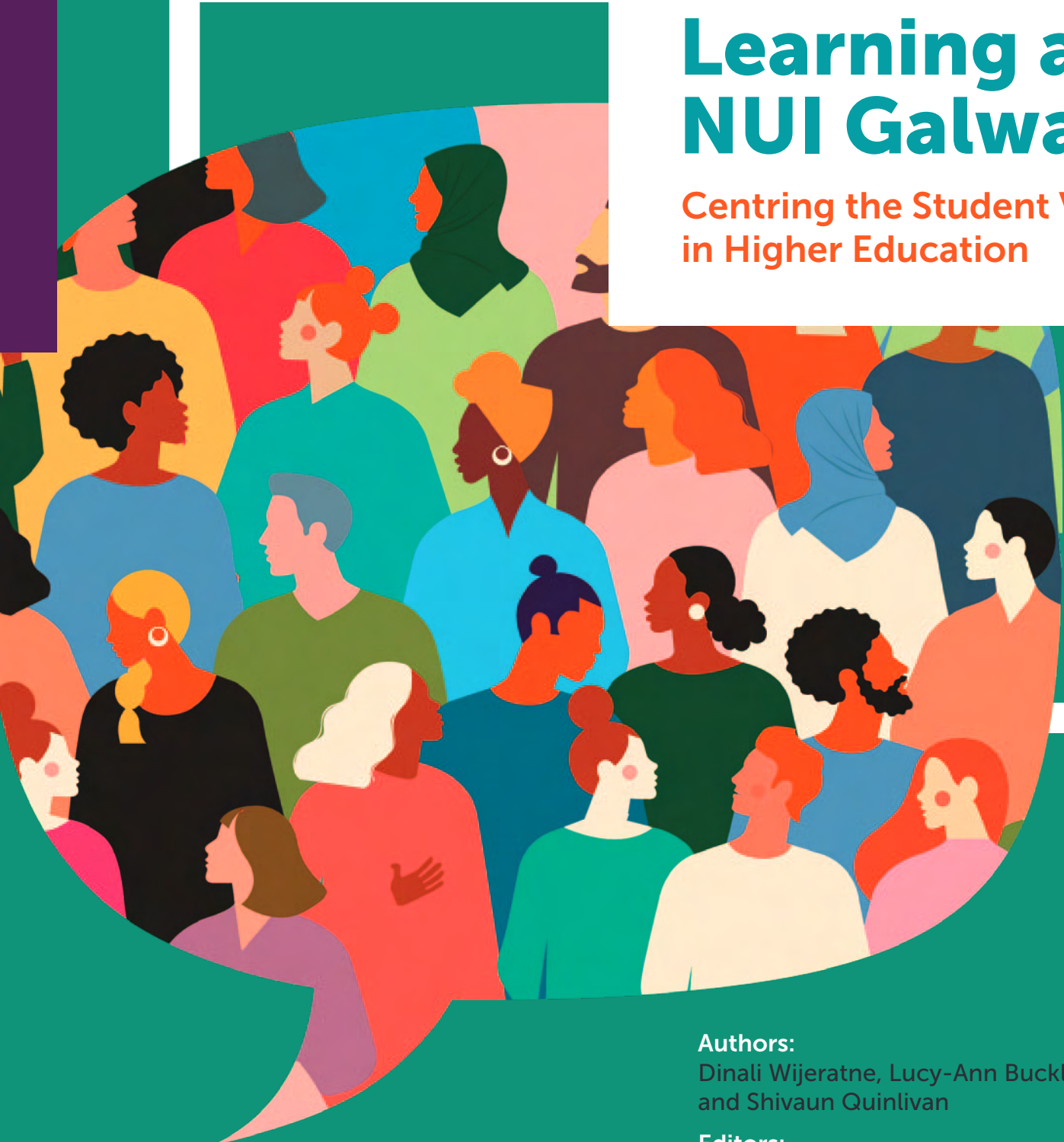
NUI Galway
OÉ Gaillimh



NATIONAL FORUM
FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Inclusive Learning at NUI Galway

Centring the Student Voice
in Higher Education



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Disclaimer

All facts and opinions expressed in this research report are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of either NUI Galway or the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education.

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This initiative aims to improve the learning experience and environment, particularly for students from diverse backgrounds, using participatory methods.

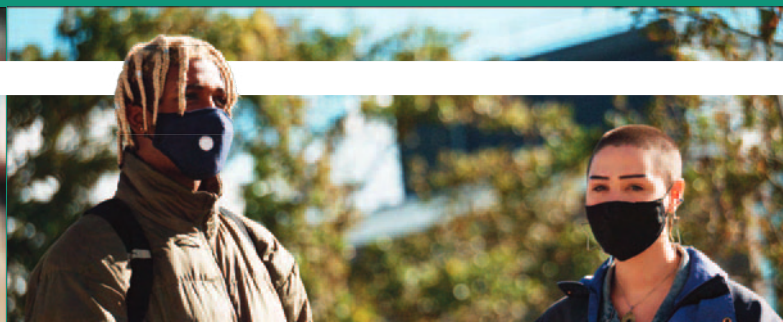


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List of Abbreviations

AHSSBL	Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Business and Law
CELT	Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching
DFHERIS	Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
DSS	Disability Support Services
GRC	Graduate Research Committee
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher Education Institute
IUA	Irish Universities Association
NFETL	National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education
NUI Galway	National University of Ireland Galway
PGR	Postgraduate Research
PGT	Postgraduate Taught
SBE	J.E. Cairnes School of Business and Economics
School of Maths	School of Mathematics, Applied Mathematics and Statistics
Shannon College	Shannon College of Hotel Management
STEMM	Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UMT	University Management Team

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Executive Summary





This report is the Final Report of the *Inclusive Learning at NUI Galway* project. Supported by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, the project set out to enhance inclusive teaching and learning practice at NUI Galway for postgraduate students, particularly those from diverse backgrounds. In order to improve inclusion, we first had to understand the barriers to inclusion and participation experienced by postgraduate students in NUI Galway. International research demonstrates the prevalence of exclusionary practices in higher education which impact not only on the student experience, but on retention and completion rates. It follows that identifying and addressing barriers to participation should not only improve the learning experience of all students, but impact positively on retention, progression and performance.

Student diversity is a strategic priority at NUI Galway, and recent years have seen a notable increase in this. However, in line with the university's values of *Respect* and *Openness*, the focus of this research is not only on the numbers of students from non-traditional backgrounds participating in the university's programmes, but on their sense of inclusion at all levels within the university. For this reason, we adopted a participatory approach to our research, with significant student involvement in project design, delivery and evaluation. The goal was to centre the student voice – to hear directly from our students, and to learn from their lived experiences.

We identified five schools to participate in our research. These were: the School of Law; the J.E. Cairnes School of Business and Economics (SBE); Shannon College of Hotel Management (Shannon College); the School of Mathematics, Applied Mathematics and Statistics (the School of Maths), and the School of Physics. The range and choice of school was strategic as it was broadly representative of the University. The five schools included both STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine) and AHSSBL (Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Business and Law) schools, as well as a professional discipline and a satellite campus. The students included both students from taught and research programmes.

The research engaged directly with students, using online surveys, interviews and focus groups. The first survey (Survey 1) took place in March 2020 (pre-Covid-19), and the second survey (Survey 2) took place in December 2020, during pandemic restrictions. The findings of the surveys are not intended to be representative but rather to provide a snapshot of the views of particular students at particular points in time. We also used a mixture of individual interviews and focus groups to explore the experiences of particular cohorts in more detail, focusing on international and intercultural students, students with disabilities, students of different genders, students with caring responsibilities, and LGBT+ students.

The findings of Survey 1 were in many ways positive, with 85% of students stating that they found their learning environment at NUI Galway inclusive. However, 6% of students did not find it inclusive and a further 9% were unsure. In effect, therefore, 15% of students did not feel sufficiently positive about their learning experience to answer in the affirmative. Students were more inclined to identify fellow students as exclusionary than teaching staff; this was particularly the case for students with disabilities, and Black, Brown and ethnic minority students. LGBT+ students were more inclined to find teaching staff to be less inclusive.

Survey 2 indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing restrictions had a significant impact on the student experience. This survey indicated that only 66% of students found their learning experience to be inclusive, while 13% found it exclusionary and 20% were undecided. This survey also identified that students from diverse backgrounds, i.e. Black, Brown and ethnic minority students, LGBT+ students, and non-national students, were more likely to find that learning was not inclusive, than students from traditional backgrounds. There were some indications that some students with disabilities found the remote learning experience more inclusive than other groups, but this is not fully borne out by other findings.

Survey 2 also included specific questions on the impact of the pandemic on the student learning environment. Again it was evident that the impact of the pandemic restrictions was not equally felt. For example 82% of female students found their learning environment less inclusive than pre-Covid, compared with 58% of male students. Similar views were expressed by students from Black, Brown and ethnic minority backgrounds, and students with disabilities. A further interesting finding was that some students still found other students to be exclusionary even after the introduction of pandemic restrictions, which significantly reduced inter-student contact. The primary issue identified by students in Survey 2 related to social exclusion. Students stated that they did not feel included in social events in their College, School or Discipline. This is a surprising finding given that there were so few events during the remote learning period, and it may simply indicate that students deeply felt the absence of social events and interaction.

Prior to the pandemic, the research interviews and focus groups highlighted a broad range of educational issues, such as the un-inclusive nature of large classes, difficulties with block teaching, course workload, assessment timetables, loneliness and isolation, as well as difficulties getting work placements. Many of these barriers were replicated after the move to remote learning, with some concerns, such as those regarding assessments and loneliness, perhaps more pronounced, particularly for international students. The impact of the pandemic was also particularly high on students with caring responsibilities, especially when schools and childcare facilities were closed, and some students with disabilities.

In addition to the general educational barriers identified, students very clearly identified attitudinal and systemic barriers. Attitudinal barriers included negative assumptions relating to race, in particular. These were evident on the part of both staff and fellow students within the university, and also in the private sector, notably in connection with accommodation and employment opportunities. Systemic issues related to the structures of the institution that impacted negatively on certain groups. The lack of suitable childcare was a major barrier to learning for many students who were parents, and the lack of affordable accommodation was a very significant problem for international students, especially, many of whom experienced racial discrimination in the private

rental sector. International students with children faced even greater barriers in respect of both these issues, as they were particularly disadvantaged by the long waiting lists for childcare places and there was little family-friendly accommodation available. Postgraduate research students also identified the university's unpaid work requirements as a major barrier that impacted their learning experience. Additionally, accessibility was consistently raised by students with disabilities: accessibility issues related to learning materials and the physical campus, but also the failure of some lecturers to take on board necessary accommodations and, in a few cases, the necessity to identify their disability and explain their required accommodation to lecturers, sometimes in front of their classmates.

While recognising that we have raised many issues in this research, we conclude the report by making recommendations with a view to addressing the barriers to participation and to ensuring that NUI Galway constantly evolves to ensure that it is inclusive for all. The recommendations are set out thematically, looking at general issues, policy suggestions, and responses to systemic issues raised in the research.

This report is drawn from more detailed research publications (forthcoming).





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**Why this
research is
important**

All students are entitled to feel they belong and are welcome in the Higher Educational Institute (HEI) they study in. Exclusionary practices impact not only the student experience, but retention and completion rates (NESET Report (2013)). Improving the student learning experience and the removal of barriers to participation should accordingly impact positively on student retention, progression and performance. While we use the term 'inclusive learning' in this report, it is clear from the literature that this is a contested term and its implementation has always been problematic (Armstrong et al., 2011). That noted, we have relied on the definition of inclusion in education espoused by Ainscow et al. (2006 and 2020). In this understanding, inclusion is a process, an ongoing search to find ways to respond to diversity. It is about the identification and the removal of barriers, with the goal of improving the presence, participation and achievement of all students. Inclusion therefore requires us to pay particular attention to those at risk of marginalisation, exclusion or underachievement.



The primary focus of this research was to identify the barriers experienced by postgraduate students in the National University of Ireland Galway (NUI Galway) and to make recommendations for change based on the barriers identified. While the focus of this research is on barriers to participation, it is of note that the Bologna Process promotes the idea of a diverse student body, one that on entering and graduating from HEIs reflects the diversity of the population (Bucharest Communiqué 2012).

It is evident that the student body in Irish HEIs is changing, though whether it fully reflects the diversity of the population is not as certain. The change in the demographics of the student body, both locally and nationally, is positive, but there is a corresponding need for HEIs to respond to that change. While there have been notable increases in the number of students from diverse backgrounds, this increase is not uniform. This is evidenced by the ongoing low numbers of members of the Traveller/Mincéir community (HEA 2021), suggesting that further actions to ensure the presence of this community are necessary. In contrast, the number of students with disabilities registering with support services in HEIs has increased by 226 over the last 11 years (AHEAD, 2021). In response to similar increases in the UK, Vickerman and Blundell (2010) questioned whether the numbers of students with disabilities had actually risen or whether students were just more comfortable disclosing their disabilities. Whatever the case, what is evident is that disability support services are experiencing an exceptional increase in the use of their services, requiring a more sustainable model of supports provision for students with disabilities. There are also data indicating an increase in international students (IUA) and students from non-traditional backgrounds and from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (HEA 2017). However, while we can evidence some of the changing demographics, there are also significant data gaps. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest an increase in transgender/non-binary students, however as most HEI records do not capture gender identities other than male

and female, it is not possible to be definitive. Moreover, Brady et al (2019) stress the urgent need to collect data related to the educational attainment and progress of children who have been in care, in order to inform policy and practice on this issue.

This research focuses on barriers to participation as well as the identification of good practice. International research demonstrates the prevalence of exclusionary practices in higher education in relation to students from diverse backgrounds, including race, ethnicity, gender, LGBT+ status and disability (Bishop and Rhind, 2011; Collett 2007; Morgado et al, 2016). Nationally, there is a wealth of information addressing barriers to participation at different educational levels, though this research is often specific to a particular group of students. For example, a number of reports have addressed barriers to participation in higher education for students with disabilities. Those barriers can vary from the stigmatising impact of being labelled and the attitudes of students and staff, to the inaccessibility of learning materials and the impact of that on a student's studies (Padden & Tongue, 2018; Spassani et al, 2017; Hanafin and Shevlin, 2007). In respect of Black, Brown and ethnic minority students, there is research addressing students in post-primary education in Ireland. That research highlights that many Black and minority ethnic¹ students perceive that White Irish students get preferential treatment, and that teachers fail to address or lack awareness when addressing racist bullying (Gilligan et al (2010)). The literature indicates that all students desire lecturers to intervene in racially hostile situations, yet many fail to do so (Boysen, 2012; Linder et al, 2015). At higher education level, there is research indicating the failure to value non-Western qualifications, the impact of which is to impede the progress of students from non-Western backgrounds in HEI: (Ní Dhuinn, 2017; Mc Daid and Nowlan, 2021).



¹ We use the term "Black, Brown and ethnic minority" in this report, however the Gilligan report being referred to here uses "Black and minority ethnic".

There is ample literature highlighting the demands of parenthood being a significant barrier both to access and retention in education. That research indicates that access to childcare is particularly problematic and impacts on all parents' ability to engage in education. That impact is more significant for lone parents (Zappone, 2015; Byrne and Murray, 2017; Murphy, et al. 2008; NESF, 2001). The issue of childcare was also identified as an issue for mature students (Fleming et al, 2010). The data also indicate that the number of mature students choosing to attend higher education is in decline. In 2012/13, 13% of new entrants were mature students; in 2018/2019 that figure had dropped to 7.1%, significantly below the target of 16% in the National Access Plan target. Finally, significant data and evidence highlight the impact of socio-economic status and educational attainment. The HEA's own data from 2018/2019 indicate that students from affluent areas are twice as likely to attend HEIs than students from disadvantaged backgrounds; the latter also accounted for only 4% of students in high points courses such as medicine. Indeed, the data indicate that only 55 HEI students came from 'extremely disadvantaged' backgrounds (HEA 2021).

This research addresses student diversity at a local level at NUI Galway. For the purposes of the research, we focused primarily on four groups, based on the priorities identified by the Office of the Vice President of Equality and Diversity at NUI Galway. These were: gender equality, disability, LGBT+ and cultural diversity.² Cultural diversity is broadly defined to include race, ethnicity, culture, language, and religion. In addition, based on student interviews, we included carers as a distinct category. The university's flagship goals particularly emphasise the inclusion of students with disabilities (for instance, through increased accessibility and the adoption of the principles of Universal Design for Learning).³ The university's flagship goals also state that we will 'encourage and welcome a broad international mix of staff and students across our taught and research programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels'.⁴

The remainder of the report sets out a short overview of our research methodology. We then present our findings from a range of data sources: student surveys, individual interviews and focus groups. Finally, we present the conclusions drawn from these findings and our key recommendations.

² <https://www.nuigalway.ie/equalityanddiversity/culturaldiversity/>

³ *Shared Vision Shaped by Values* Openness, Flagship Goals 2021, Access and Inclusion AP01 and AP02.

⁴ *Shared Vision Shaped by Values* Openness, Flagship Goals 2021, Access and Inclusion AP05.

3

What did we do and who was involved?





In designing this research, we used a participatory approach, with significant student involvement in the project design, delivery and evaluation. A guiding principle throughout was to centre the student voice. For this reason, we mainly used qualitative methods to explore the perceptions of postgraduate students regarding their teaching and learning experience in NUI Galway, with some limited use of semi-quantitative methods. We used online surveys to provide an overall assessment from the broader population of postgraduate students and identify potential issues for exploration. The online surveys were open to all postgraduate students but included demographic questions to help us to identify issues experienced by particular student groups. We also held individual interviews and focus groups to generate more in-depth information from selected student groups.

Qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups are believed to provide a 'deeper' understanding of social phenomena than would be obtained from purely quantitative methods, such as questionnaires (Gill et al., 2008). Individual in-depth interviews are widely used by researchers to co-create meaning with interviewees by reconstructing perceptions of events and experiences (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Focus groups are particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think but how they think and why they think that way (Kitzinger, 1995).

Data collection

Data were gathered in compliance with ethical approval granted by the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee (with appropriate revisions following the advent of Covid-19). A number of schools were selected for participation: the School of Law; the J.E. Cairnes School of Business and Economics (SBE); Shannon College of Hotel Management (Shannon College); the School of Mathematics, Applied Mathematics and Statistics (School of Maths); and the School of Physics. The range and choice of schools was strategic as it encompassed students from Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine (STEMM) and Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Business and Law (AHSSBL), as well as a professional discipline and a satellite campus. Therefore this research is broadly representative of the University as a whole.

Students were offered a choice of engagement mechanisms to respect privacy concerns and in the hope of maximising participation. All registered postgraduate students in the selected schools, on both taught and research programmes, were invited to complete an anonymous online survey regarding their learning environment. The first survey ('Survey 1') was conducted in March 2020 and the second ('Survey 2') took place in December 2020. As most master's students are on one-year programmes, the aim was to capture two separate cohorts of master's students, and to track any changes in the responses of research students. In the event, however, the timing of the two

surveys enabled a comparison between the experiences of students prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, and their experiences during the pandemic and following the move to remote learning. The survey explored the students' experience of their learning environment from an inclusion perspective. These included both positive aspects of inclusion and barriers to inclusion. In light of the current Covid-19 restrictions an additional question was added to Survey 2 to explore the impact of online learning on student experiences of inclusion and exclusion. While all postgraduate students were invited to complete the anonymous survey, demographic questions were included to enable us to examine the experiences of particular groups, identified from the literature and in the university priorities as being at particular risk of disadvantage or exclusion (see above). Although we were interested in the international student experience, the survey did not ask if students were 'international students' as this term can potentially give rise to confusion. EU students might assume the question referred to the rate at which fees were paid (EU or non-EU). However, a question on the rate of fees could also be confusing, as international PhD students can apply for a reduction of fees to the EU rate. Ultimately, the project used Irish citizenship and ethnicity as proxies to explore the experiences of international and intercultural students, albeit with significant limitations (e.g. Irish citizens include many Black, Brown and other ethnic minority students). Although the institutional focus has primarily been on the experience of female students, we broadened this to a focus on the impact of gender generally, enabling us to consider the experiences of male students and also intersex and non-binary students. We also looked at the impact of caring responsibilities, particularly in the gender context.



We initially planned to hold focus groups with four key student groups: international and intercultural students,⁵ students with disabilities, LGBT+ students, and students of different genders, including carers. We also offered the option of individual interviews to students who preferred not to participate in focus groups. Students were invited to volunteer for interviews or focus groups by sending emails and information sheets through module lecturers, programme coordinators, the heads of the participating schools, as well as classroom visits by the project researcher. Information sheets and consent forms were circulated among participant students two weeks prior to the relevant interview or the focus group. Interview and focus group guides were prepared giving careful consideration to our research questions as well as the sensitive nature of the research and potential vulnerabilities of participants. The research part was entirely handled by the independent researcher (not a member of academic staff) to protect the privacy of the participating students. In the event, we had participants for focus groups with three cohorts of international students (one from SBE, one from the School of Law and one from the School of Physics). Other students largely preferred to engage in individual interviews. In total, 31 individual qualitative interviews were held with students from the identified groups. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the focus groups and individual interviews were moved online after March 2020.

Interviews and focus groups were recorded, with the permission of the participants. The recordings were transcribed by an independent transcriber who had pre-signed a 'transcription ethics protocol'. We used the NVivo qualitative data analysis computer software package to code our data (including responses to open questions from the two online surveys) in a structured manner for thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is mainly described as 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Vaismoradi, Turune & Bondas, 2013; Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79). The value of thematic analysis lies not only in the knowledge that can originate from it, but also as a mode for presenting research methods as living entities that resist simple classification, and can result in establishing meaning and solid findings (Vaismoradi, Turune & Bondas, 2013; Giorgi, 1992; Holloway & Todres, 2005; Sandelowski, 2003). Key thematic findings are outlined in this report, with some selected quotations from research participants for illustration purposes. To preserve confidentiality, the names of interview and focus group participants have been anonymised. Quotations from the two online surveys are clearly identified as such, and the participants here have not been given anonymised names but rather general descriptors (e.g., 'Female Law PGT Student'). This is because some students may have answered both surveys (for instance, postgraduate research students who are on programmes longer than a year in duration) or may also have participated in focus groups or interviews.

⁵ The term 'intercultural' in this research refers to cultural diversity within Irish society, including ethnic, linguistic or religious diversity.



4

Survey overview

Students were asked to consider a number of statements regarding the inclusiveness of different aspects of their learning environment and to express their level of agreement or disagreement. The 'learning environment' was broadly defined, and students were advised that it covered all contexts where learning took place.⁶ The statements for consideration were as follows:

'I feel included in my learning environment at NUI Galway'.

'Teaching staff act in an inclusive way in class and other learning contexts'.

'Other students act in an inclusive way in class and other learning contexts'.

'I feel included in social events in the College, School or Discipline'.

A question on the impact of the pandemic on the inclusiveness of the learning environment was added in the second survey. Students were invited to comment on their response to each question and to give examples of inclusive and exclusionary behaviour.



Survey 1, completed in March 2020, had 130 responses. However, 24 of these provided demographic data only and did not answer the substantive survey questions. These responses were therefore excluded from the data analysis. Survey 2, completed in December 2020, had 136 responses. Again, however, 17 respondents provided demographic data only and did not answer any substantive questions. These responses were also excluded from the data analysis. The figures given in this report therefore relate only to those responses that answered at least some of the substantive survey questions ('admissible responses'), i.e. 106 admissible responses to Survey 1 and 119 admissible responses to Survey 2. Overall response rates by school are provided in Figure 1 below. The surveys do not claim to be representative or statistically significant but simply provide a snapshot of the perceptions of a range of students at a particular time.

Almost all admissible responses answered all substantive questions⁷ and many respondents also took the opportunity to make additional optional comments. However, some respondents preferred not to answer some demographic questions. Accordingly, when this analysis refers to a particular group, such as students with disabilities, or students with caring responsibilities, it means those respondents who identified positively as being in that group.

⁶ The survey questionnaire stated: 'All students at NUI Galway are entitled to a positive, supportive, accessible and inclusive learning environment. This applies to all learning settings, such as online learning, lectures, seminars, tutorials, group projects, presentations, field trips, placements and assessments. The learning environment also includes the Library and online resources, and informal learning settings, such as study groups'.

⁷ Two respondents to Survey 1 did not answer the question on whether teaching staff acted in an inclusive way, but all other respondents answered all substantive questions.

	AY 2019/20 (Survey 1)							AY 2020/21 (Survey 2)					
	SBE	Law	SCHM	Maths	Physics	NM	Total	SBE	Law	SCHM	Maths	Physics	Total
PhD	63	44	0	32	37	0	176	54	37	0	31	29	151
Research Masters	3	5	0	0	2	0	10	1	2	0	0	0	3
Taught Masters	625	111	6	19	45	0	806	598	117	29	24	41	809
Total number of PG students in School	691	160	6	51	84	0	992	653	156	29	55	70	963
Relevant responses to survey	29	11	4	19	38	5	106	67	24	0	17	11	119
Response Rate	4	7	66	37	45		11	10	15	0	31	16	12

Figure 1 shows the total postgraduate student population in each school and the survey response rates (admissible responses only).

Survey 1 – March 2020

58 respondents to this survey (55) identified as female, 43 (41) identified as male, and two (2) identified as transgender.⁸ Two respondents (2) preferred not to answer this question. 29 respondents (27) were from the SBE, 11 (10) were from the School of Law, 19 (18) were from the School of Maths, 38 (36) were from the School of Physics, and four (4) were from Shannon College. Five respondents preferred not to state their school. 70 students (66) identified as White, 31 (29) were Black, Brown or ethnic minority, and five (5) preferred not to say.⁹ Slightly over half of the respondents (51) stated they were Irish citizens; nearly all the rest (47) said they were not.

Only 8 students (8) identified as having a disability or long-term health condition, though three (3) preferred not to say. 16 respondents (15) identified as LGBT+ while seven (7) preferred not to say. 22 students (21) identified as being on a research programme (PGR), 44 (42) identified as being on a taught programme (PGT), two (2) preferred not to say and 38 (36) did not respond to this question. It is therefore not possible to estimate the PGR/PGT response rate for this survey with any degree of accuracy.

Survey 2 – December 2020

55 respondents to this survey (46) identified as female, 59 (50) identified as male, one (1) identified as transgender, while four (3) preferred not to answer this question. 67 respondents (56) were from the SBE, 24 (20) were from the School of Law, 17 (14) were from the School of Maths, and 11 (9) were from the School of Physics. None were from Shannon College. 78 of the respondents (66) identified as White, 37 (31) were Black, Brown or ethnic minority while four (3) preferred not to say. 70 respondents (59) were Irish citizens while 46 (39) were not and

⁸ All percentages in this report are rounded to the nearest whole number.

⁹ White Irish Traveller was listed as a separate ethnic category to White.

three (3) preferred not to say. 17 respondents (14) stated that they had a disability or long-term health condition, 13 (11) belonged to the LGBT+ community, and 42 (35) stated they had caring responsibilities.¹⁰ 18 students (15) identified as being on a research programme (PGR), 95 (80) identified as being on a taught programme (PGT), and four (3) did not specify.

Survey findings

The initial findings were relatively positive. In Survey 1 (see Figure 2), 85 of students expressed at least some agreement that they felt included in their learning environment, while only 6 indicated that they did not. However, while this proportion is very low, a further 9 were unsure that they felt included. This is a cause for some concern as it suggests that 15 of respondents did not feel positive enough about their learning environment to answer the question in the affirmative.

Learning Environment Inclusive

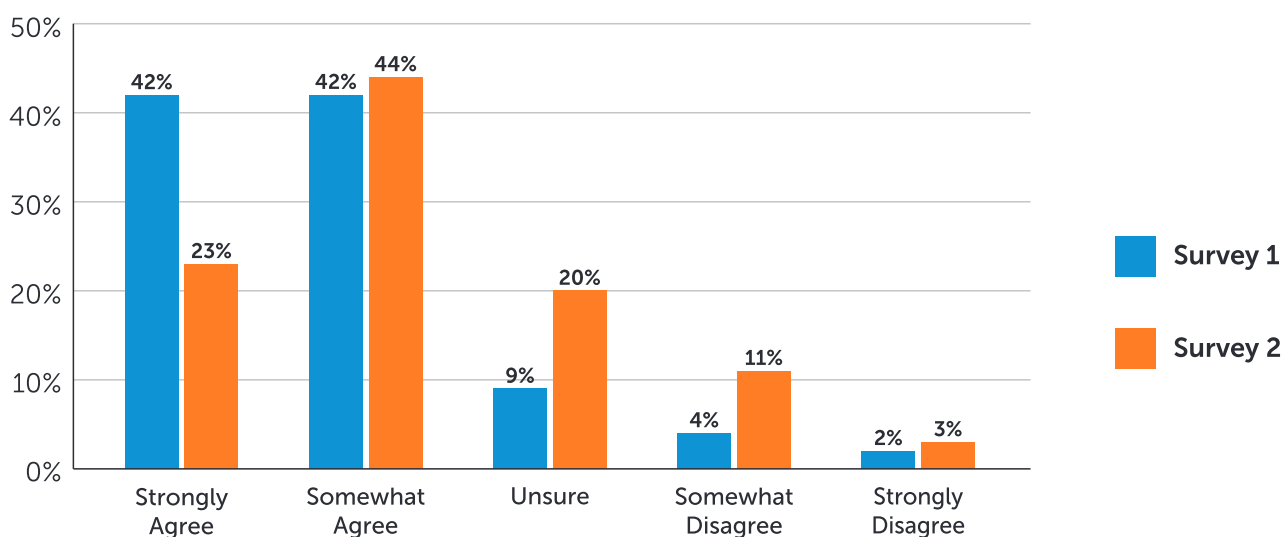


Figure 2: 'I feel included in my learning environment at NUI Galway'

When the responses were examined further, it appears that more students saw other students as being non-inclusive (9) than teaching staff (2) (see Figures 3 to 5). Some student groups were especially likely to see other students as non-inclusive (see selected comparisons in Figure 6).¹¹ This included Black, Brown and ethnic minority students (13 compared with students who identified as White) and students with disabilities (13 , compared with 8 of non-disabled students).¹² Only LGBT+ students found teaching staff significantly less inclusive than average (6 , compared with 1 of non-LGBT+ students).¹³ In general, exclusionary behaviour by other students (though not a major problem) seemed to be more problematic than staff attitudes.

¹⁰ A question on caring responsibilities was added in Survey 2 in light of some of the issues raised in interviews and focus groups.

¹¹ Students were regarded as finding an aspect of their learning environment un-inclusive if they expressed disagreement 'somewhat disagree' or 'strongly disagree' with the statement relating to that aspect.

¹² However, this figure represents only one student with a disability.

¹³ Again, however, this represents only one LGBT+ student.

Teaching Staff Inclusive

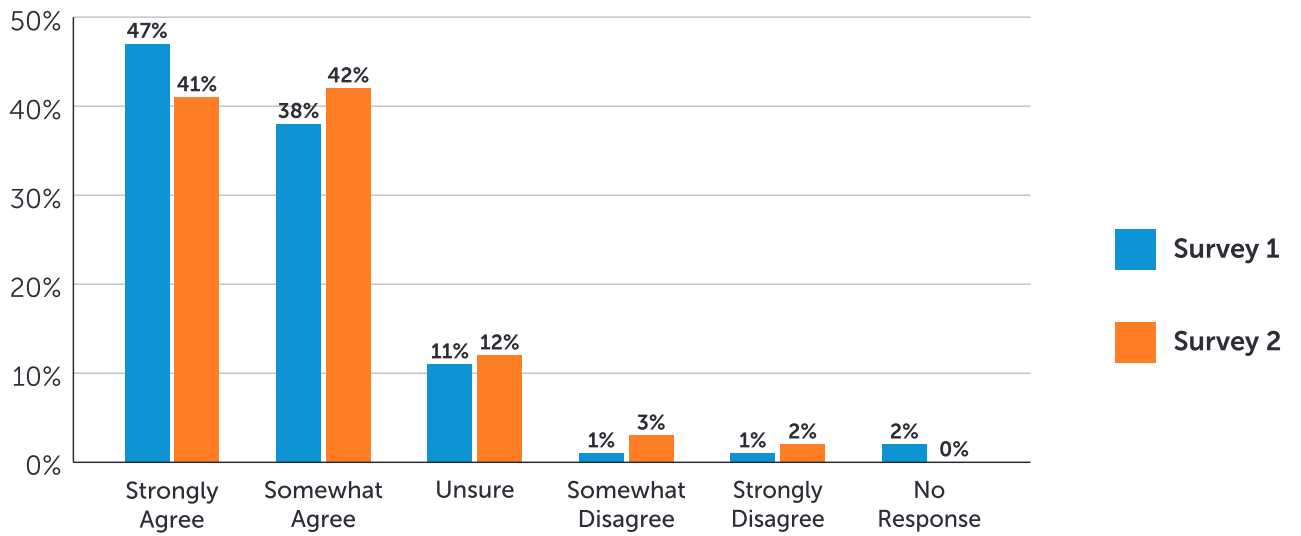


Figure 3: 'Teaching staff act in an inclusive way in class and other learning contexts'

Other Students Inclusive

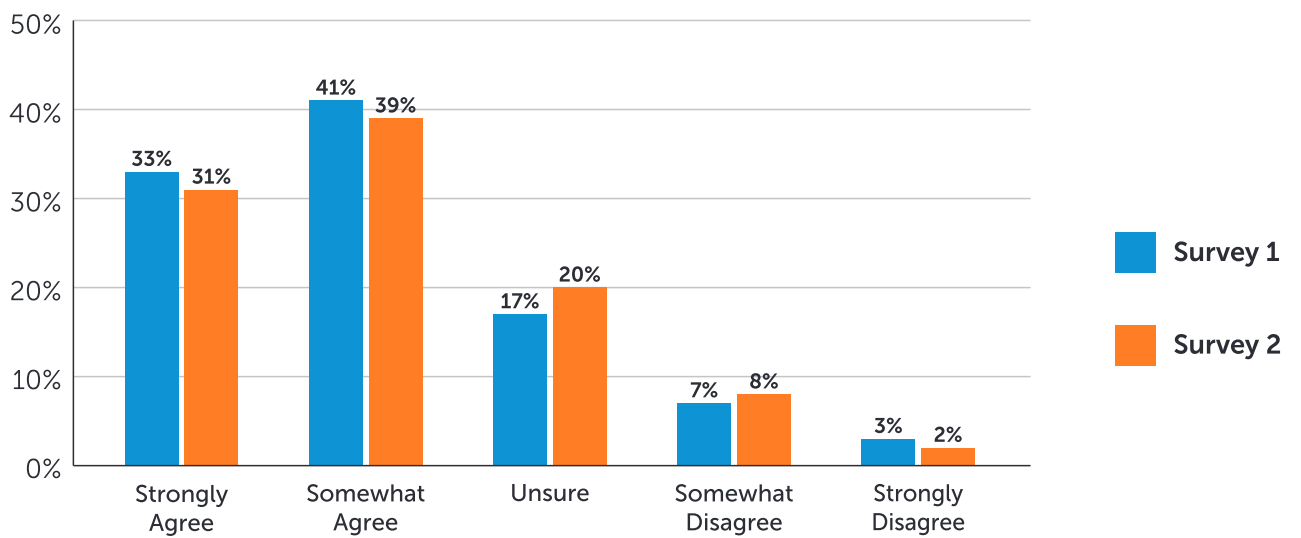


Figure 4: 'Other students act in an inclusive way in class and other learning contexts'

Social Events Inclusive

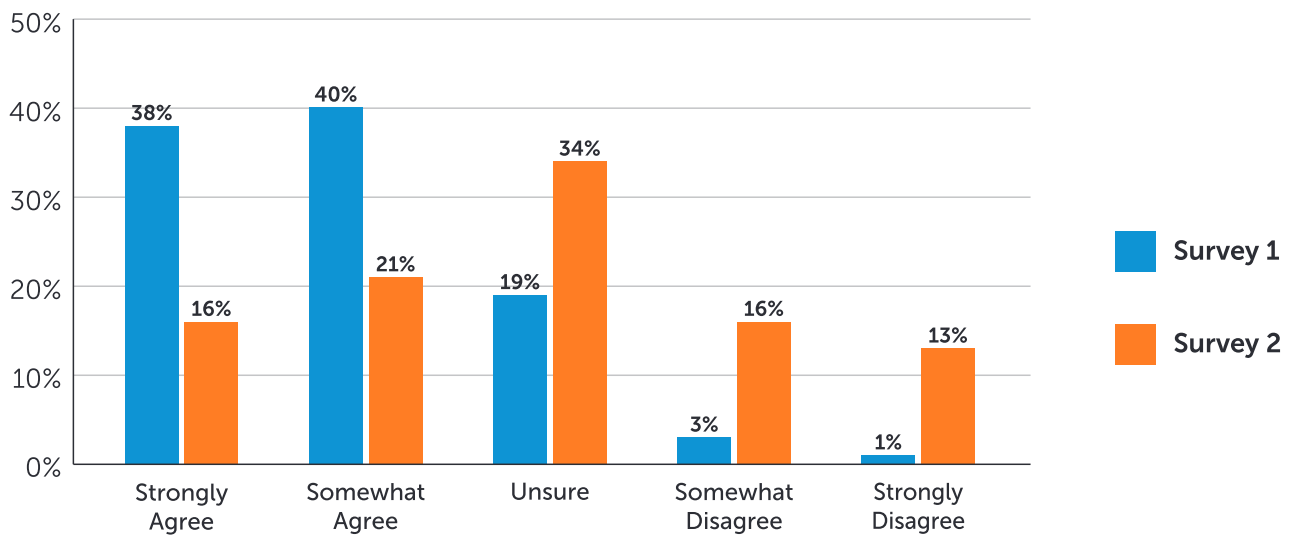


Figure 5: 'I feel included in social events in the College, School or Discipline'

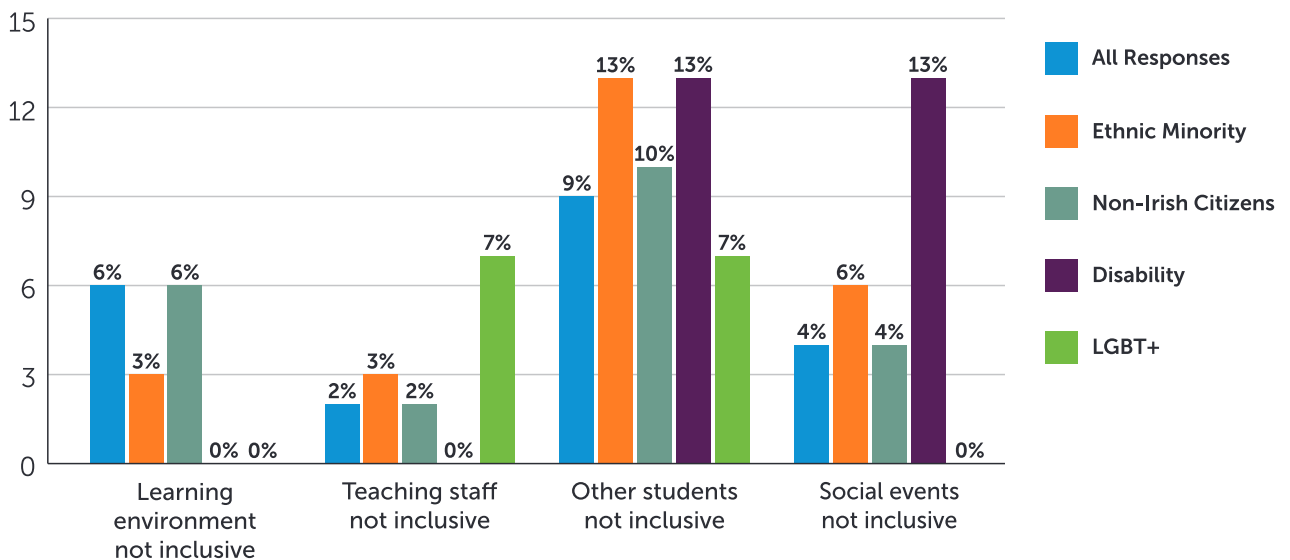


Figure 6: Survey 1 – responses by selected groups

The picture following the second survey was significantly different (see Figure 2). The proportion of students who said they did not find their learning environment inclusive had more than doubled (13%), and significantly fewer students (66%) said that they found it inclusive. Just over 20% were unsure of their response. Overall, therefore, about 34% of respondents either found their learning environment exclusionary, or did not feel sufficiently positive to respond affirmatively.

It is particularly worrying that some groups found their learning environment less inclusive than others (see selected comparisons in Figure 7). These included ethnic minority students (17%, compared with 12% of White students), students who were not Irish citizens (17%, compared with 11% of those who were) and LGBT+ students (20%, compared with 12% of students identifying as

non-LGBT+). Students with disabilities appeared to find the learning environment more inclusive than others (only 6¹⁴ said they found it non-inclusive, compared with 15 of those who did not identify as having a disability), but this conclusion is undermined by other findings, discussed below.

Surprisingly, given the reduced contact with classmates, the same proportion of students as pre-Covid identified other students as being exclusionary (9%) (see Figure 2). There was a slight increase in the proportion of students who felt that staff were not inclusive (5%). However, students with disabilities found teaching staff less inclusive than average (12%, compared with 4% of students non-disabled students), and also found other students less inclusive (24%, compared with 7% of non-disabled students). It is hard to reconcile this with the previous finding that disabled students were less likely than other groups to find their learning environment non-inclusive. However, it may reflect a need for additional support during the pandemic on the part of some disabled students, or a greater degree of social exclusion.

Indeed, social exclusion seemed to be the primary issue identified by most respondents. 29% of students indicated that they did not find social events inclusive, a surprising finding given that there were so few social events during lockdown. It is possible therefore that this finding may simply reflect a lack of social events, and a sense of isolation by many students, rather than events being exclusionary as such. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that students from some minority groups found social events less inclusive than students overall. 29% of Black, Brown and ethnic minority students, compared with 26% of White students¹⁵. Likewise, 35% of students who were not Irish citizens indicated they did not find social events inclusive, compared with 26% of those who were Irish citizens. This may reflect additional isolation experienced by these groups during remote learning and lockdown. International students, in particular, are likely to lack support networks in a foreign country, and to be in need of social supports.

Unsurprisingly, 67% of students said that the pandemic had made their learning environment less inclusive (Figure 7). However, the effects were worse for some student groups (Figure 8). 82% of female students said they found their learning environment less inclusive than before, compared with 58% of male students. This did not appear to be related to caring responsibilities (however, see further discussion below). Likewise, 73% of Black, Brown and ethnic minority students, 74% of students who were not Irish citizens, and 71% of students with disabilities said they found their learning environment less inclusive. This compares with 63% of White students, 61% of students who were Irish citizens, and 66% of non-disabled students.

Thus, while Covid had a heavy impact on students generally, students from some minority groups felt significantly more excluded as a result. This impacted both the learning environment and the social environment.

¹⁴ One student.

¹⁵ Students who identified as members of the Traveller/ Mincéir community are included in the category of Black, Brown and ethnic minority students.

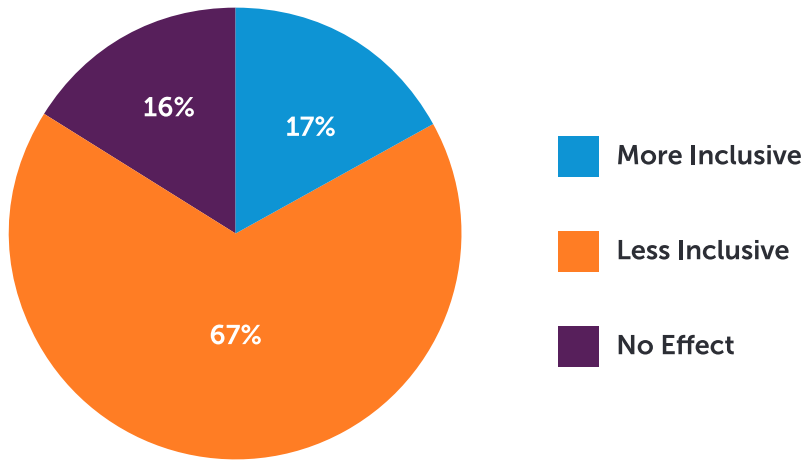


Figure 7: Impact of Covid-19 on the learning environment.

Learning environment less inclusive

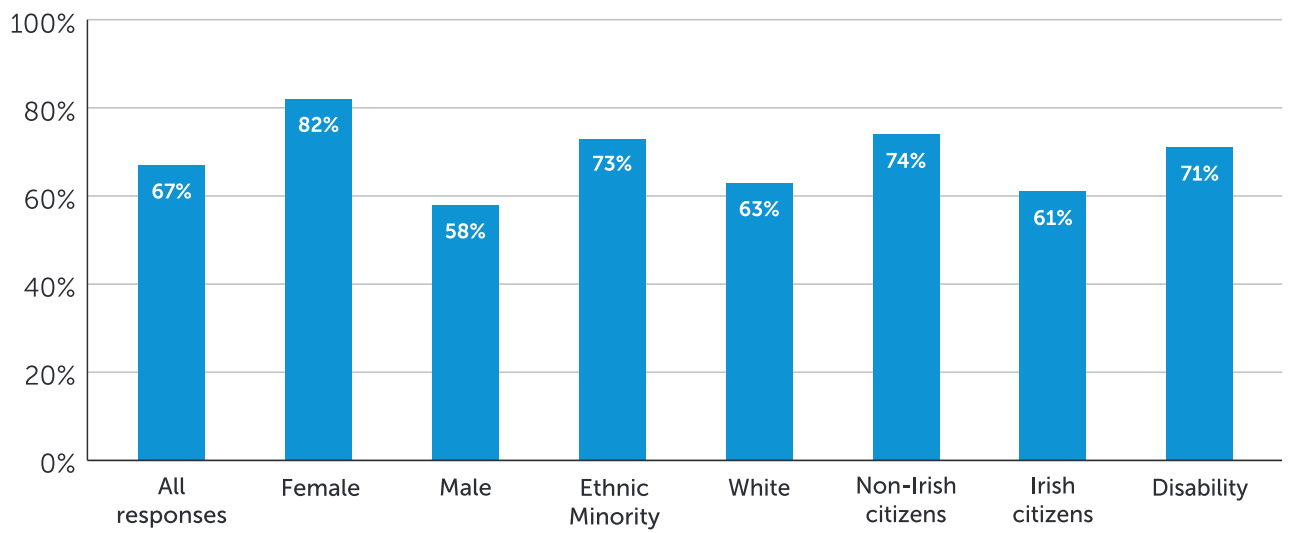


Figure 8: Impact of Covid on the learning environment by group.





5

**What did
students
say?**

The surveys, interviews and focus groups provided students with the opportunity to describe their experiences and the problems they faced. Prior to the pandemic, students raised broad educational issues, such as the un-inclusive nature of large classes, difficulties with block teaching, workload, assessment timetables, difficulties in getting work placements and loneliness/isolation for research students. Many of the issues raised pre-Covid were also raised after the pandemic commenced, in particular concerns around assessments, remote learning and loneliness. What was perhaps more striking was that some students (particularly international students, students with caring responsibilities and students with disabilities) commented on the particular difficulties that lockdown and remote learning caused for them.

In addition students raised some systemic issues, problems with childcare supports, unpaid work requirements, and accommodation. Students also raised attitudinal issues and assumptions from both students and staff that were problematic. Finally, it became evident that the impact of the pandemic on the social environment was keenly felt, and that this in turn heavily affected the learning environment.



5.1 General issues raised – Pre-Covid 19

In general, students found teaching arrangements (pre-Covid) to be inclusive. In many cases, staff were praised for their commitment and support, and students emphasised that staff were approachable and helpful.



I always feel very good during lectures. Teaching staff were always very nice and understanding especially when I first moved to Ireland.

Female, International, PhD SBE (Survey 1 – March 2020)

The lecturers understanding that people came from different backgrounds for this course and everyone has different strengths and weaknesses.

Female, LGBT+ student, PGT Mathematics (Survey 1 – March 2020)



While many responses were very positive, concerns were raised about a number of issues that made the learning environment more challenging.

First, students noted that large classes made it difficult to get to know others or to engage with learning opportunities. In this regard, some students noted that they had expected a particular class-size, based on online programme information, but in reality their class had been considerably larger. This may have been due to outdated online information, or because the class for the particular programme was small but the group was taught in combination with other groups. Students felt this was not the experience they had expected, or been led to expect.

A second issue related to block teaching arrangements, where students were taught very intensively for short periods. Students found this difficult, as they did not have sufficient time to process information or engage with their learning. They felt it would have been preferable to spread the same material over longer periods, as this would have given them more time to digest new information, leading to higher level engagement and less exhaustion.

A third issue was the workload for many courses, particularly the amount of prescribed reading. All the students had expected a significant workload at masters level, however, they felt that it was unmanageable in many cases. As a result they had considerable difficulty keeping up with classes. The difficulties were particularly acute for international students, who often faced not only a language barrier, but came from quite different educational systems where there were different teaching styles and learning expectations. These students found it very challenging to adjust to the Irish system, particularly as many of them were doing a masters in a different discipline to their original qualifications or background. This created additional difficulties where essay writing and citation styles differed from those they were trained in. All of these issues created extra barriers to learning, which took time to overcome. In the main, students found academic staff very supportive when they asked for help, and they also availed of other supports such as the Academic Writing Centre. Even so, however, many continued to struggle, and the difficulties experienced were compounded by what some students felt was a very short teaching semester, which they felt was rushed and compressed their learning.

Students also raised issues around assessment arrangements and deadlines. The main issues raised in this regard concerned clashing deadlines – which students felt could have been avoided by better co-ordination across programmes – and the late notification of results in some programmes, which they felt did not allow them sufficient time to prepare for resits, as well as causing them personal stress. Students also raised issues about the availability and timeliness of feedback, which they regarded as essential to knowing if they were on the right track.



I'm dyslexic, I am a mother of a child with a disability, my husband has mental health issues and I have to work and care for my family. I only have limited time for course work, and I have to manage my time wisely. Now for example I have two things due in on the same day from the same lecturer, one of them is a group assignment, so it's not too bad, and the other one's an essay. So, I still have not even looked at that. Why do they do that? The other, it is not like a small assignment, it is an essay, you need to write and leave it and come back to it again, think and revise etc. so I have to rework it a few times before I'm even happy about a first draft.

Molly – PGT student in SBE (dyslexic and a parent of a child with a disability) (Interview)

For research students, a particular barrier was the lack of opportunity to engage with others. This was often the result of poor planning or design, where doctoral students were based in different locations, depending on their discipline, but could also depend on the availability of space.

This location of the PhD students creates an environment of isolation. I don't come in much because there is no sense of community – so in our department our PhD students are in three different locations, very disjointed, and lecturers have no idea about the hardship that we go through because we are far away from our department. This is an easy fix but no matter how many times we have complained they won't fix it but there are so many buildings going up all over the university without proper human related planning.

Kelly – International PGT student in SBE (Interview)



Finally, international students raised the issue of work placements as being exclusionary. In general, students were very keen to have placements as a core aspect of programmes, as they felt they greatly enhanced their employability. However, not all programmes had placements, or had enough placements for all students, leading to dissatisfaction. A specific point was raised that international students often needed the placements most (if they were to earn back the much higher fees and costs they faced), yet were less likely to get them than Irish students. In some cases this was because employers were less willing to give placements to international students, but there were also systemic issues. E.g., students on one programme highlighted that the limited placements available were allocated based on results in their Bachelors (undergraduate) degree. As grading systems could vary across countries, they felt this disadvantaged them compared with Irish students.

5.2 General issues raised – Post-Covid 19

Many of the issues raised pre-Covid were exacerbated during the pandemic, though students also identified some new issues arising from the move to remote learning. While many of the issues were of general application, some groups – notably international students, students with disabilities, and students who were carers – experienced particular challenges, or were affected to a greater degree than others by the general barriers. Many students recognised that academic staff were trying their best in difficult circumstances:



Teaching staff trying their best, Our course director always motivate us and always ask our opinion and consider our feedback every time. Every lecturer try to communicate with every student and also make the class entertaining and try some new teaching techniques by taking Chapter quiz, by debate, by breakout room. So teaching staff playing their role very well.

Male, International, Carer , SBE, PGT (Survey 2 – Dec 2020)

As said above, the lecturers are conscious of the new learning environment and are seem to be trying hard to accommodate the students.

Male, White, Irish, SBE, PGT (Survey 2 – Dec 2020)



At a basic level, most students found it much more difficult to engage with online learning, or even to understand new information delivered online. Some of this was due to the increased impact of language issues – international students, in particular, often found it difficult to follow online classes, even though they spoke good English, as it could be harder to understand accents online, particularly given the lack of non-verbal cues that would be available in person.



Just staring into an empty screen, it's a little weird, and can be depressing sometimes.

Meera – International PGT student in Law (FG)

Online learning has been quite rushed... the readings are quite long, very arduous, and it does feel like I'm always trying to catch up. And doing it online from home, it does take a mental toll. It has only been few weeks and the semester are already over, but our reading list is so long I know that I will never get it done, there are tonnes. I am in a state of mind like I don't care anymore.

Raman – International PGT student in Law (FG)



These difficulties were increased in some cases by issues with technology – often problems with connectivity, but also relatively simple issues like teaching staff failing to speak clearly into the microphone, meaning that their lectures were largely inaudible. However, other factors also impacted the ability to engage. For example, many students found it extremely difficult to concentrate and maintain their focus during online delivery. This was particularly due to a lack of class interaction. Once students fell behind, they found it difficult to regain lost ground, as there were limited opportunities to engage with teaching staff.



The online format is very distracting, when you're on a computer, a webinar for two hours long or more, it can be very distracting, you can zone out and either start surfing the web or something else, and that really does disrupt the learning experience.

George – International PGT student in Law (FG)

The different internet speeds can be an obstacle, sometimes if I try answer a question in the chat the module could have moved on before I could even send the message on blackboard with the internet speed I have at home...

Female, PGT student in Physics (Survey 1 – March 2020)



While most lecturers were open to contact via email, students felt that the quality of email interaction was different, and less conducive to the kinds of informal discussions they needed. Some staff were also very slow to reply to emails, or did not reply at all. While students expressed appreciation of the pressures staff might be under, some felt they were not getting help that they really needed. Students also felt that online materials and resources were insufficient in some modules, and highlighted difficulties gaining access to library places.

5.2.1 Isolation

At a personal level, students expressed great disappointment at being off campus, particularly given that many of them had travelled great distances to be here, often at great financial and personal cost. International students, in particular, highlighted how their mental health had suffered due to prolonged isolation. They lacked the support of their family and friends, but had no opportunity to create new networks as they were not on campus and in many cases had never even met their classmates. These students highlighted the mental toll of doing everything online, without any sort of personal contact with others. Many also had to contend with worry for their families in their home countries. While some students expressed great appreciation of the counselling service, or programmes such as *Seas Suas*, many also expressed disappointment that the university had not done more to support their mental health at this time, and felt that more social events in particular would have been beneficial to them.




Was really expecting the university to hold some sort of events after the lockdown. Everyone is home so NUIG should have thought of the mental health, especially international students, most of us don't have family or many friends over here. And there is no option of going out and everything is closed. It was a really difficult time for me.

Lee – International PGT student in Physics (FG)

5.2.2 Assessment

These personal stresses were increased by the pressure of online exams, which students found very worrying, particularly where disciplines changed the format of exams. While students understood the need to maintain exam integrity, they found the prospect of doing exams in an unknown format incredibly concerning, particularly where additional time was not allowed and exams had to be completed, scanned and uploaded within a tight framework. Some students also had to make significant changes to their planned dissertations or thesis topics, where the fieldwork originally anticipated could no longer be carried out. This again they found very stressful.



In terms of online exams, I would rather write in a normal exam than the open book exams that we did. I think they had to change the structure of the exam paper as exams were converted to an open book exam and that was awful because normally, we would have studied the past exam papers and it threw us. And apart from one module I think the rest of them had their exam structures completely changed. So, if you had been learning just the past exam questions, like, you'd have ended up in a big mess. Also, we are not used to open exams because that was how the exams were setup and if you do not know the answers, forget it. Because you don't have any time to start running through your lecture notes to find the answers.

Sabrina – International PGT student in Physics (FG)

5.2.3 Childcare

Students with children found remote learning particularly difficult, especially when childcare facilities and schools were closed for prolonged periods. Even if these students had time to attend online classes, they commonly suffered frequent interruptions. They had very limited study space, and found it very difficult to find any quiet time to study. As a result, they often had to study late at night, when they were already tired. For some, matters improved when the library or other campus study spaces reopened, but they also noted considerable difficulties in accessing these spaces. For instance, the online booking mechanism for the library was identified as very unfriendly to users.



No childcare during lockdown and difficult to work from home for those who have shared apartments. Less supports and engagement from college – this is not inclusive.

Female International PGT student in Law (Survey 2 – Dec 2020)

I have really needed the library, only because it's hard to study here with my children during the day – it's kind of a small place, small space. So, I've been needing a place, just kind of get away and concentrate... Studying from home – it's difficult during the day for me, with children, so I usually have to go to school, or wait until they're in bed at night. Usually by the end of the day I'm a little exhausted, but I really try to focus on getting it done, or at least a couple of things done every night before I go to bed. So, it hasn't been horrible when I can do it at night, but during the day it's really hard for me, because I have to shut myself in a room and try to really make it soundproof as much as I can. But even with that, my children make noises, and just that's what they do, and that can disrupt some of my concentration.

Lucien – International PGT student in Law (FG)



5.2.4 Online learning

Experiences of online learning were not wholly negative. As indicated Survey 2, some students found remote learning *more* inclusive, rather than less inclusive.



Having my course remote/online has made it easier for me to partake and I am remote from Galway. I would really want the online ability to continue.

Male, White, Irish, Carer, SBE, PGT (Survey 2 – Dec 2020)

Remote in my view has been a great success, more time to study and less travel and expensive involved.

Male, White, Irish, SBE, PGT (Survey 2 – Dec 2020)



Some students with disabilities found the courses more accessible when teaching went virtual.



I have a visual impairment and therefore, I feel like working from home has helped me more than if I had to sit in a class far away from the board/lecture and not being able to see anything. The video lectures are amazing as I can watch them with the magnifying tool on my computer to know what the lecture is saying and doing.

Female, PGT student in SBE with a disability (Survey 2 – Dec 2020)

However, this was not the experience of all disabled students. Others found it much harder to concentrate or to participate in a virtual environment, for a range of reasons.

I have ADD I find it really, really hard to concentrate that long. I am finding it quite difficult because it is mostly kind of independent learning. I have so many readings and so much research to do on my own. It is just hard to motivate myself and concentrate on the screen for that long.

Leena – PGT student in Law with a disability (Interview)



I have anxiety which often prevents me from engaging in class discussions, since moving to online learning I find it even harder to participate in online class discussions.

Female, PGT student in Law with a disability (LGBT+) (Survey 2 – Dec 2020)



5.3 Systemic issues

As well as the general points outlined above, students raised a wide range of systemic issues in interviews, focus groups and surveys. Some of these were specific to NUI Galway, while others were more general, and less within the University's control. All, however, constituted significant barriers to learning. The most significant of these are outlined below.

5.3.1 Childcare

It was expected that caring responsibilities for children, in particular, might act as a barrier to learning for some students. However, the interviews and focus groups offered more detailed insights into the scale of the problem. Students with children consistently experienced difficulties accessing affordable childcare, at times that met their learning needs. Although the University has a crèche facility (operated by a third party contractor), with subsidised places for students, the number of places is limited and there is a very long waiting list. Many students therefore had to rely on the private sector for childcare, and often this was simply unavailable or unaffordable. The difficulties were particularly acute for international students, for whom a long waiting list was simply not viable. The difficulties were compounded where students had problems locating accommodation in proximity to childcare (see point 3.e) or were required to engage in unpaid work (see point 3.b), which made childcare even less affordable.

The lack of childcare had a significant practical and emotional impact. As well being a source of considerable stress and anxiety, some students were unable to attend classes or events due to lack of childcare; others experienced significant difficulties conducting their research, particularly fieldwork.

I had a baby during my first year and I had to collect data and I had no family so I brought my grandmother here and was actually travelling with my grandmother and my child so I could get things done. It was tiring. I couldn't do things that would take all day. Some seminars I would have liked to take part in, but you can't really bring a baby to a seminar and expect to learn much. I managed to get my PhD work done. I wasn't able to do much beyond the research and writing.

Meena – International PhD student in Law (mature and a single parent) (Interview)



The difficulties experienced by students who were parents were particularly acute during the Covid-19 pandemic, as even those who normally had childcare were now left unsupported (see further point 2.c).

The lack of childcare did not impact solely on students who were parents. Some students had to ask friends to care for their children, while they undertook teaching responsibilities. As well as causing stress to the student parent, such *ad hoc* arrangements also adversely impacted on the friends who provided the care, cutting into their study time and causing further guilt to the parent.

Students highlighted that a commitment to inclusion, without practical supports, was effectively meaningless; without an effective infrastructure, they remained excluded from their learning experience.



I know like anybody who has caring commitments whether male or female, it's particularly an issue for women in the university sector, you know, that's still really, really a big issue and I don't think a statement of intent about being inclusive and about recognising caring commitments is enough. I think there has to be you know, a structure, a system in place that actually underpins the recognition of this issue, you know? Nobody should have to just find out because they need to find out. They should be told so they feel that they are included from the beginning without having to juggle with their lives while studying. They should know that there is a structure in place if they face in difficulties.

Maureen – International PhD student in Law (Interview)

As a possible solution, some students suggested that the university should provide a drop-in day care facility that students could avail of as and when required, eg while teaching, attending a class or taking an exam.

The university crèche is fully booked for one or two years and impossible to get in there. There should be a place in the college for parents to leave their kids for couple hours for example, if a student has an exam and she couldn't find anyone to sit with kids, that facility should be available because the only other alternative for that student is not to sit the exam.

Sally, an International PhD student in Mathematics (Interview)



5.3.2 Unpaid work

A second, highly significant barrier to inclusion for many students was the requirement to provide unpaid work for the University. This is a long-standing policy, whereby students on NUI Galway Scholarships were expected to 'contribute' up to a maximum 120 hours per annum to their School or discipline.¹⁶ This obligation is mandatory for funded students; the obligation for unfunded students is less clear. The guidelines state that 'normally' all PhD students should make a contribution but then continues to outline the mandatory nature of the rule for funded students. While this was originally intended to enable students to develop transferable skills (e.g. teaching experience), it has become a significant point of contention as many students feel unfairly exploited by the requirement.

The perception of unfairness is exacerbated by the fact that the requirement itself appears to be very inconsistently applied in terms of the nature of the 'contribution' expected (e.g. teaching, conference organisation), the number of hours required, the allocation (or not) of preparation time for new classes, and payment for going beyond the required hours. Some students reported working significantly in excess of the maximum 120 hours, for no additional payment; the sense of injustice this generated was compounded by the awareness that other students worked far fewer hours, or received payment for excess hours. Students were aware that some schools and disciplines did not apply the contribution requirement in the final year of study, while others did. They also reported that the contribution requirement was being applied as though mandatory to students who were not on NUI Galway scholarships. A further issue was that, in reality, the 120 hours are often more notional than real – a set number of hours is assigned to certain teaching and related academic tasks, but the actual time required is not actually calculated, sometimes leading to a significant disparity.

The 'contribution' requirement posed a barrier to learning in a variety of ways. First, the requirement to spend so many hours working 'for free' significantly reduced the time students had for their own studies. This was exacerbated where students were required to teach or supervise outside their own areas of expertise, as this entailed significant additional research and preparation that was not accounted for when the hours of 'contribution' were calculated. The requirement to provide 'free labour' also impacted on students' ability to support themselves financially, as many needed to undertake additional, paid work in order to make ends meet – thus cutting again into time for study.

¹⁶ QA245 University Guidelines for Research Degree Programmes



These terms and conditions of unpaid work change, I think. Because this is what I heard from other people. I have a friend in [named school] who was supervising students while running a lab, while teaching classes and she wasn't being asked and she wasn't getting paid, and she barely had time for her own research. And she has the same scholarship as me so I know that there is a lot of people not even asking if they could do it, but just telling their PhD students what to do.

Meena – International PhD student in Law (Interview)

A further issue was the lack of predictability, compounded in many cases by a lack of consultation – for example, students being informed that they were to teach or supervise in particular areas, without any discussion of their willingness or ability to do so.

I think PhD students should have some guidelines we sign and agree from the very beginning of our PhD because it feels like the disciplines are asking us to do stuff at their convenience rather than what we had agreed to do at the beginning. We need to plan our time too and we struggle to keep up with our own PhD research. I was given teaching and four masters projects to supervise and told I was required to work 120 hours free. So, these masters projects also were nothing related to my work and I had to supervise them plus meet them twice before they submitted the final report.

Maria – International PhD student in SBE (Interview)



In one case, a student reported that she was expected to teach for free for a month, even before registering at the University. This student had to pay for accommodation for an additional month at her own expense, while receiving no discernible benefit.



I was not paid the scholarship on the very first month because the scholarship starts in October, but the discipline asked me to come over to Ireland in September to be able to start teaching. It was a hard month.

Katie – International PhD student in Physics (Interview)



The contribution requirement also impacted on the learning experience of undergraduate or masters students. Some PhD students noted that requiring an untrained PhD student to teach a subject they had never studied before was very unfair to the students being taught, who had often paid very significant fees to learn from staff experts.

It is great that PhD students are given the opportunity to teach to undergraduates, but we're not paid, we're not trained. Also, how bad it is for us to show up and be a clown in front of students, because you don't know what you are doing or teaching because some of us have no clue about how to teach or about the module we have to teach. The undergrads, they have paid a massive amount of money to be here, to be taught by specialists.



Kelly – International PhD student in SBE (Interview)

The same student also noted that PhDs who were required to do compulsory unpaid teaching opted to do the minimum, as there was no incentive for them to do more.



Some PhD students are thinking, what the f*? And then they show up to their tutorials, and if they have to give the answers to a questionnaire, they'll just say, question 1, answer b, question 2, answer c, okay bye, you're done for the tutorial today. To be honest they're right to do it like this – why would they even bother, when they're being treated unfairly by the lecturers, who sometimes never send them any materials.**

Kelly – International PhD student in SBE (Interview)

Students emphasised the financial impact of the contribution requirement, particularly where students were on different stipends.

I would like it if we were demonstrating, to not have as many hours, or if we still had to do those hours, to get paid. That would make a massive difference, because people are on different stipends, so some in College of Science are on 12 grand, and I'm lucky I'm on 16 grand, but it's still quite tight. Some have private funding and I know some people who are on 18 because it's coming from their professor, so there's variation between stipends.

Melani – PhD student in Physics (Interview)



Overall, students were extremely vocal about their dissatisfaction with the 'contribution' requirement, and with how they felt they were treated by some Schools and academic staff, saying they felt like 'slaves' (Female, PhD student in SBE (Survey 1 – March 2020)). Other students said they would discourage acquaintances from coming here.

5.3.3 Lack of clear complaints procedures

Students expressed a sense of powerlessness or futility in respect of raising complaints or concerns. The issues that students raised related to systemic issues such as the requirement to provide 120 hours teaching, or specific individual complaints about supervisors. The sense of frustration may in part be due to students not familiarising themselves with the relevant codes of conduct, or the failure of the discipline or supervisors to bring them to their attention. However, the student feedback suggests it was less a lack of familiarity with the complaints process, than a sense that if they complained it would impact on them and their reputation.



I feel like when I have an issue it's very hard to find someone to raise it because there's so many politics that you feel like you can't talk to anyone because they're going to judge you or they're going to be gossiping around with other scholars or faculty members. Then you feel like you might get into trouble or something. Lecturers here gossip a lot.

Maria – International PhD student in SBE (Interview)

One student who did raise a concern with her supervisor was told to raise it more formally, but was left feeling aggrieved and unsupported.

I am in my final year and I shouldn't be doing any unpaid work and they asked me to, so I raised this issue with my supervisor, and she said, and this is only one example, she told me to raise it with the Department but then she said don't say that you talked to me. I was so helpless because my supervisor is the only support I have as an international student because the international office only minds undergrads and masters' students, so I got zero support.

Maria – International PhD student in SBE (Interview)



For PGR students, the student supervisor relationship is very important. While most students were silent on this issue, or indeed spoke highly of their supervisors, others raised concerns. The issues raised point to more systemic failures, not related to an individual and isolated breakdown of a student supervisor relationship, but to do with ongoing failures of supervision. In that instance the students did not feel there was adequate oversight of supervisors, with the result that the problems were allowed to continue. The students proposed solutions from the necessity for supervisor evaluation, to expanding the oversight role of Graduate Research Committees (GRCs).



There should be supervisor evaluations because some of our supervisors have a trail of students behind them who haven't completed so someone needs to look into these things.

Melani – PhD student in Physics (Interview)

5.3.4 Accessibility

Students with disabilities raised a range of issues regarding accessibility, this related to the physical infrastructure, learning materials and in one instance, the very systems designed to enhance accessibility were problematic. Students particularly highlighted difficulties relating to the functioning of a lift near the library, which had a long history of not functioning properly, despite repeated attempts at repair. This had a very significant impact on students' ability to access the library, as well as other facilities such as restaurants and shops. Notably, even where a venue was physically accessible, some disabled students felt excluded by the room layout, which confined those with mobility issues to a single location.

When the exterior lifts up to the library (to avoid many stairs) is out of action it excludes people like me access to the library, which was broken most of the year in 2017/2018 and I had lots of arguing with buildings¹⁷ to get it fixed which eventually got fixed two weeks before I finished my courses. I find NUIG around the library and getting to the concourse building difficult. The large lecture rooms can be difficult and disabled students are often excluded at the back of the room.



Female, HEAR PhD student in Law with a disability (Survey 2 – Dec 2020)

CASE STUDY 1

Ramona's Experience

(PhD Law, Student with a disability – interview)

Ramona is a PhD student with a disability. She attended an interview and spoke about some of the accessibility issues that she encountered. Ramona told us about her experiences with the problematic lift near the library.




This year the lift broke, with me in it, so the fear I had was that would happen again, and I really nearly didn't do my PhD because of my issues I had in my masters around physical access to different places, because it was such a negative experience. I felt very disabled, not because of my disability, but because of the access issues.

It is evident that this failure of physical accessibility could also constitute a mental or emotional barrier to learning.


Ramona also raised the importance of not only having accessible toilets, but of maintaining a good standard of hygiene.

¹⁷ In fact, the Buildings Office continually engaged the lift contractor to repair the lift, but as it repeatedly broke down again, it is unsurprising that this student perceived the lift issue as unresolved.




NUIG really needs to increase disability accessible toilets, and being kept to a good standard of hygiene, particularly in high traffic areas within the university, that matters to disabled people. We often need bladder and bowel care during our full day at college. So, if you can't get a clean disabled toilet, it actually is really hard to do that safely. So, it's a little bit of an issue for people.

Importantly, Ramona highlighted that accessibility is broader than access to buildings. She noted the importance of ensuring learning materials and resources are accessible, and felt that staff need to be trained in providing accessible materials.



They should also ensure that all module documents and formats are as accessible for blind, deaf, and people who may have other challenges, that we have proper captioning, subtitling, making sure that our materials are as accessible-friendly as possible to all disabilities. And that the people that are delivering lectures are also trained in these, so they know what they need to cater.

Ramona also identified a need for more training for disabled students themselves, in relation to technologies that supported their learning needs. She considered the lack of such training to be detrimental to the students' learning experience.



There should be training specifically targeting disabled students, so that they really know, and can have full ownership of it. Sometimes, depending on people's disabilities, technology can be very difficult say Blackboard training. Also, they can also be invisible barriers to people like feeling uncomfortable using new technology. So, there may need to be repeat training, Especially for a month, in the first month of college or something like that.

5.3.5 Accommodation

Many students experienced difficulties in securing appropriate and affordable accommodation. Often this was due to general difficulties with the rental market, but the difficulties were particularly acute for international students. International students generally arrived in Galway at the start of their programmes, usually in September but often later in the case of doctoral students, or where there was a delay in processing a visa application. By the time they arrived, most accommodation had already been taken by students already in Ireland, and international students were left with the least suitable, most expensive, or most distant options. The students were commonly unaware of the housing shortage in Ireland and were surprised by the high rents.



Rents are increasing every year. At this rate it's going to be unaffordable to live anywhere close to the city.

Lee – International PGT student in Physics (FG)

When I first came, I had to stay at 'Sleepzone' hostel for almost three weeks and was trying to find accommodation but most of them were too expensive or there was some other issue. Anyway, currently I'm staying in a room in a house, its owner occupied, lot of restrictions but not too bad. So, I did have a lot of difficulties with finding accommodation at the beginning.

Sabrina – International PGT student in Physics (FG)



The difficulties were even greater for Black, Brown or ethnic minority students who were often rejected by potential landlords due to racism, even where the accommodation had been booked in advance.



Some of my friends I know, even after getting a place, after arrival the landlady or the landlord has terminated their contract, so it was quite horrible.

Kavita – International PGT students from SBE (FG)

Some of these students ended up in very inappropriate and undesirable living arrangements, not from choice, but from lack of any alternative. They were generally unfamiliar with their legal entitlements and were unaware of university supports.

I currently house share with 19 people. I have never lived anywhere else in my life before and this was the first time so, I trust people and make friends easily. But the reality was different and after a while I had some very bad experience with some of them and I mentally suffered a lot. I felt all alone, and it was really a hard time for me.

Laila – International PGT student in SBE (FG)



International students with children faced very acute difficulties. There was little family-sized accommodation, and landlords were often reluctant to accept children. These difficulties were often compounded by racism, so this group of students faced multiple disadvantages. Commonly, these students ended up living in very inconvenient locations, at the expense of their education.



There's a new student, came with two kids and the husband, and it has been a nightmare for her and the stress she was under. And to me, it was mad because no one had told her before arriving in Galway that it is hard to get accommodation for one person, never mind four with two young kids, and also, you're Black. And we would know alright that Irish people are not always super welcoming when it comes to different colours. So, you know, she had the odds against her. She lives in [a named distant town] now, because it's the only place she could get something to rent.

Kelly – International PGT student in SBE (Interview)

Rents are so expensive, and landlords don't like children and because I am international it is even worse. I did finally find a house but have to walk so much because the buses are tricky from where I live. So, walk to drop off my child to school and walk back to college and again do it in the evenings. So, 3 hours walking every day. This really distracted my PhD at the beginning because I am tired and wasting my time on these walks but now, we are working online, and she is learning online, and I can get more work done.

Naima – International PhD student in SBE (Mature, Single parent) (Interview)



In general, students felt that the university had not done enough to make them aware, before they came, of the potential difficulties in sourcing affordable accommodation. They also felt that the university should do more to support the accommodation needs of international students, for instance, through the provision of family-friendly accommodation. Students acknowledged that University accommodation was available, but felt that it was too expensive, and that the terms and conditions were disadvantageous, for instance, in relation to cancellation. This led to some students feeling unable to leave accommodation that was not meeting their needs, to the detriment of their learning.

5.4 Attitudinal Barriers

Students reported a range of attitudinal barriers which impacted their learning environment. These arose largely from negative stereotypes and unfavourable attitudes linked to factors such as gender, race, sexual orientation and disability. The incidents outlined related to both student and staff attitudes. While the online surveys primarily identified student attitudes, rather than staff attitudes, as being exclusionary, the examples provided in the interviews, focus groups and surveys encompassed exclusion by both students and staff.

5.4.1 Gender discrimination

While not widely reported, some students felt that gender discrimination was evident in a number of contexts. First, in relation to the general learning environment, some students felt that course materials and teaching arrangements were insufficiently inclusive. These students highlighted a tendency to exclude women from reading lists, but also from guest lectures and other events. However, gender discrimination was also evident in personal interactions, where some students identified sexist language or assumptions directed towards themselves or others.



Anyway, one of my supervisors (I have two) said once or twice that I have to stop smiling and being too nice to people because then people think that I am pretty but stupid. Meaning that the discipline staff is not going to take me seriously. Number one it is an insult to me as a woman and number two I'm an international student, and it is a cultural thing we are all different and this comment is so insulting I was so mad, but I didn't know whom to say it to.

Maria – International PhD student in SBE (Interview)

There are still major issues in terms of gender balance in teaching and in the content they deliver. It's also evident in the demographic and behaviour of many of my peers. Misogyny and sexism seem to be accepted as 'banter'. From my perspective, a massive push for diversity awareness and inclusion is needed for NUI Galway to be considered an elite university. One of my peers has stated that they regret doing their MBA in Galway on the premise of how prevalent sexism has been.

Male, PGT student in SBE (Survey 1 - March 2020)



5.4.2 Disability discrimination

Students with disabilities identified significant positive supports in their learning environment. These included, particularly, the help of the Disability Support Service at the university. However, a few students also identified attitudinal barriers to inclusion. These differed from accessibility issues as they were not structural, but rather related to particular individuals.



The learning Environment is not inclusive because lecturer was preventing me use a device that would assist me in my learning and was requesting me to disclose my disability to the class.

Male, PGT student in SBE with a disability (Survey 2 – Dec 2020)

5.4.3 Racism

Racism was raised as an issue affecting students in a variety of contexts. As noted previously, it had a significant impact in relation to obtaining accommodation. However, it was also encountered in the learning environment, in various forms, by at least some students, though others felt it was not a significant issue.

There has been no racism, there was nothing like that which I ever, ever felt in my college. I thought, I was always treated as equal candidate, like no matter I am an international student or whatever cast or creed or whatever I was.

Kathy – PGT student in SBE (FG)





Personally like, before I came to Ireland, I had my concerns because of my colour. You know, you hear things from home like, you have a lot of racists and all of that. So, I was concerned about how people were accept Blacks and everything. But when I got to Ireland like, from the airport, the university to the classroom, like I never had any racial profiling from anyone. It's okay like. I don't feel excluded from anything. Nothing when in class or societal activities or clubs. It has always been up to me to decide if I want to join any group or be part of anything like. I've never had restrictions based on colour or anything.

Sabrina – International PGT student in Physics (FG)

However, even students who did not feel they were discriminated against said they encountered mistaken assumptions and stereotypes, e.g. the assumption that international students had poor English, or were unlikely to understand information or instructions. While some students did experience language as a barrier, particularly in the social context, others were adamant that a lack of comprehension should not simply be assumed.

During a discussion in groups, a professor approached my classmate and I to ask about our opinion on a particular topic. However, when our professor was giving us instructions on our project's framework, he barely looked at me. Basically, the information was entirely transmitted to my Irish classmate who apparently would be able to comprehend him well. Therefore, my classmate would “translate” what it was mentioned. However, even though I am an international student, I speak English fluently.

Male, International PGT student in SBE (Survey 2 – Dec 2020)



International students noted that Irish students often assumed they would not be able to contribute in learning contexts; as a result, they were less willing to engage with and include them, e.g. in relation to group projects.



I do find that in terms of international students there is definitely a presumption that maybe they are not a good reader, and that the Irish are the best ones and they kind of complain whenever they get an international student in a group.

Maria – International PhD student in SBE (Interview)

At other times, international students were disadvantaged by assumptions that they knew or understood things, which in fact they did not. This included assumptions that all students understood the Irish examination system, even though there was clearly no reason to assume this in relation to international students. Similarly, international postgraduate students felt that they were assumed to be familiar already with the campus and university environment. As a result, orientation measures were not always adequate, and students felt disadvantaged.

Some international students perceived that there was an undertone of bias or racism in their learning environment. While not overt, it was clearly felt.

It has a flavour of biasness, you know... But over here in Ireland I feel that you know it is suppressed, it is hidden but it is evident in the backdoor action... It's in the way of grading and giving feedback you know, the way they treat you in the classroom, like I said it's not openly exhibited that you know, I am bias towards you. They wouldn't show it. But when it comes to grading and even giving feedback you know, I feel that it has a very, very, strong tone of biasness or I would say racism.

Arun – International PGT student in SBE (Mature, Carer) (Interview)



Some students also experienced more overt forms of racism and discrimination, often, but not exclusively, from other students. This could include:



Comments made by staff and students regarding the intellectual capacity of International students.

Female, International PGD student in Shannon with a disability (Survey 2 – Dec 2020)

Another student commented:

Englishification of a classmate's name due name being too difficult to pronounce, adopted by some staff too is not inclusive.

Female, International PGT Student in Maths (LGBT+) (Survey 2 – Dec 2020)



There was some evidence of deliberate exclusion, e.g. from social events. This affected students' sense of belonging and wellbeing.



Irish students are racists. I am a very friendly person and part of the NUIG team. I went with the team to play a game in Dublin, and we were all staying together, there was a boy's team and a girl's team. They all went out and I was never asked to join them for dinner or drinks. I felt all alone.

Bryan – International PhD student in SBE (Interview)

There was an overlap between the learning and the social contexts. For example, doctoral students in the social sciences usually research individually and are not members of research teams. However, they share research spaces and build connections with other research students, which can have a friendship aspect and also a learning aspect (e.g. discussing research ideas and concepts). It is therefore extremely important for these students that they feel included and comfortable in these settings, and that they feel able to engage with their peers on an equal basis. However, some students identified that this was not always possible, as invisible 'boundaries' might divide student cohorts. Often these were linked to language and culture, and students were not clear on how they might overcome these barriers.

Finally, some international students felt that they were at a disadvantage compared with Irish or EU students in relation to work opportunities, both within the University and externally. Examples included being expected to cover teaching hours that an Irish masters student did not wish to cover, on an unpaid basis (see discussion of 'contribution' above), whereas the Irish student had been paid for teaching. At other times, the disparity may simply have been a matter of perception, as evidence was not provided of different outcomes.

Finding a job as a non-EU student is an area where there is a high degree of racism (in the college and society), you know, even if you are overqualified for the job most of them won't even offer you a part-time job because they are looking only for Irish or EU students.

Aruna – an International PGT student in SBE (parent & mature student) (Interview)



5.4.4 Issues faced by Traveller/Mincéir students

As a legally recognised ethnic minority, Travellers experience significant discrimination and disadvantage in Ireland (FRA 2019). This includes significantly lower levels of educational attainment when contrasted with the majority population (FRA 2019). The HEA reported that in 2019-2020 there were only 110 members of the Traveller Community in higher education. In our research, the number of students identifying as members of the Traveller/Mincéir community was low, reflecting the national picture. As so few postgraduate students are Travellers, disciplinary identifiers have been redacted to preserve anonymity.

It is evident from the comments received that the students in question felt isolated and judged, both within the university as well as by the wider Irish society. They experienced issues around teaching and learning due to lack of confidence in themselves which arose from their lived experience.



Lecturers can be somewhat intimidating coming from a background where I'm the first to go to third level in my family. Even still, in my masters now in NUIG while I get very good grades, I do feel a bit of "imposter syndrome".

Female, Traveller PGT student in [redacted School] (Survey 2 – Dec 2020)

CASE STUDY 2

Brenda's Story

PGT Member of the Traveller/Mincéir Community (School redacted), Interview

Brenda is a member of the Traveller/Mincéir community and is undertaking a postgraduate taught programme. She is keenly aware of the importance of internships and work experience and highlighted the difficulties that she, as a member of the Traveller/Mincéir community experienced in trying to get such a position.



OK another one... I went to this [redacted description] because I was recommended to go to for advice on becoming a [redacted] and this guy, he was from a rural setting now, he said that the Irish people will not want a Traveller dealing with them and he said you will not get a traineeship with a small firm... in Ireland, he said if you want to get a traineeship you'd have to go to Dublin, so in a big firm you could work on the paperwork in the background and you wouldn't have to deal with any of the clients. And as I was going out, he flicked my hair and he said, cut it, said I was overweight, and he said that shows your mental state. I told him I had an interview lined up and he also they'd be only interviewing you because they'd want to show diversity but that I wouldn't get the position.

As well as displaying general anti-Traveller prejudice, these comments also demonstrate prejudice against applicants with disabilities and a lack of respect for different cultural norms, such as how Traveller women wear their hair. As such, it is a good example of the intersectional disadvantage experienced by some students.

Brenda also highlighted the necessity for the University to proactively support Traveller students.

How can Travellers get work experience when no one can get into a job?... I think the university needs to liaise with some companies to help the Traveller students out or they will never get an internship. Irish people don't want Travellers around them; Travellers are considered scum in Ireland, they'd prefer if they were off the face of the earth, I think. But Irish people give out about Travellers saying they don't pay tax, but how can we Travellers pay tax if we can't get jobs?



5.4.5 LGBT+

Students who identified as LGBT+ raised a number of issues in relation to their learning environment. The first related to staff attitudes, which were not necessarily overtly negative, but which could have been more positively inclusive in some cases. Students highlighted that heterosexuality remained the norm in the learning context, evident in, for example, the kinds of teaching examples used, which often referred to straight couples. LGBT+ students found this exclusionary, and considered that many teaching staff underestimated the importance of proactively encouraging and modelling inclusion. Some staff, however, did use examples related to LGBT+ couples, which students found very inclusive and positive.

Like, if you have 50 students in your classroom, at least two are going to be non-straight people. So, it is important to include, to feel, because I promise you, I would really feel included when I was as young as 20 years old if one Teacher had made some of those examples.

Rob – International PhD student in SBE (LGBT+) (Interview)



Staff could also have been more inclusive by identifying and using students' preferred pronouns. The importance of this was highlighted by a number of students throughout the project, and failure to do so was regarded as exclusionary:



Not asking which pronouns people would prefer to be referred to by and misgendering someone due to this.

Female, PGT student in Law with a disability (LGBT+) (Survey 1 – March 2019)

CASE STUDY 3

Male, PGT student (LGBT+, School redacted) (Survey 1 March 2020)

An un-named male PGT student highlighted many attitudinal issues faced by LGBT+ students in his detailed responses to Survey 1. In the context of students, the student had experienced homophobic comments by other students, and he highlighted the personal impact he suffered as a result.



Most students are at least progressive, but only when it suits them. I've had a guy refuse to shake my hand because he heard I was gay, and another girl say she would 'throw up' if she ever saw gay people kiss. While some people are resilient enough to not care about those things, they affected me.

This same student also reported a deep lack of empathy and awareness by a staff member, which had a significant impact on him at a time of great vulnerability. He commented:

...assignment extension rejected by staff member after I showed proof of being kicked out of my home for being gay (apparently it would have given me a competitive edge, but I would argue not being able to complete any of your work in a safe place is a bigger disadvantage).



While this was a particularly uncaring response, in general the student stated that the issue was broader than one lecturer. Overall, he highlighted a lack of awareness by the university, and the need for more proactive supports for LGBT+ students.



I have never felt like there was enough acknowledgement on universities on behalf of the very real struggles gay people go through, especially closeted individuals. I feel like there has to be a way for universities like NUIG to offer services to people who aren't out of the closet but still want to avail of some sort of service that assists them.

The student was cognisant of the University's policies and attempts to progress issues:

I feel like the university is more aware of nonbinary issues as well regarding pronouns which is nice to see.



However, he also drew attention to the overlap between the broader learning environment and the social context. Disciplinary events, for example, often counted as both, but were perceived as heteronormative. This meant that LGBT+ students could feel excluded, even where this was unintended.



It often feels like most events are catered towards heterosexual groups because they build up the majority of the population... It makes me sad, and I just wish better care was taken of students who are gay because it can impact so much of your socialisation at university.

5.5 The social environment

A strong theme coming from this research was the impact of social connection on the learning environment. Students saw human contact as essential for mental wellbeing, and hence as something that had an important effect on their ability to learn. While this was particularly highlighted in relation to Covid-19 and the move to remote learning, it was a general theme raised by many students, even outside that context.

In this regard, it is worth highlighting barriers faced by international students, in particular, in settling into Ireland and the university, as these students are particularly isolated and disadvantaged in this respect, even prior to the pandemic. Students spoke of their struggle with homesickness, in many cases exacerbated by the Irish weather, which was often depressing. They also identified cultural differences and language barriers as factors that affected their ability to make friends – even where they had good English, differences in accents, nuances and expressions could make communication more challenging. This required considerable time to overcome in some cases, and in fact, for various reasons, some students never felt fully included. Mature students also faced barriers, as they sometimes found it difficult to engage meaningfully with much younger students.

...being like an international student you have to face some problems. Like when you come here and you don't know people, you try to fit in with these people. You have the culture difference and you have to get to know the people, their culture and their behaviour, everything. So, it takes time and like making friends it takes time.

Jaya – Female PGT student in SBE (FG)



Students were generally very positive regarding societies and activities, particularly prior to the pandemic. These were seen as a valuable way to make friends and connections, and also to obtain cultural insights. However, many PGT students struggled with finding the time to attend clubs and societies, both due to their academic workload and due to the need to engage in paid work, to support themselves and their families. As the need to work already cut into their time for study, students commonly felt they could not justify further reductions of study time, even where it might have assisted their general wellbeing.



Recommendations

Recommendations

General

1. Student inclusion should not be project based: it is too dependent on the duration of the project and on individual commitment and interest. Ideally, student inclusion should be an express goal of the University Management Team (UMT) generally and the specific responsibility of a member or members of UMT.

Education

2. Programmes or modules on the University values, discrimination, consent, and active bystander training should be included in the induction for all students.
3. Ongoing training and information should be provided to staff on their legal responsibilities under relevant legislation, particularly the Equal Status Acts 2000-2018, the Employment Equality Acts 1998-2021, and the European Union (Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Application of Public Sector Bodies) Regulations 2020.
4. Ongoing training should be provided to staff on inclusive pedagogy, including Universal Design for Learning and decolonising the curriculum.

Policies

5. The university should develop and implement an anti-racism policy, and provide staff and student training in respect of that policy.
6. The university should consider introducing a policy to gather student diversity data, to ensure more systemic and longitudinal data gathering.
 - a. Data gathered should include attainment and retention data for different cohorts of students, based on diversity characteristics.
 - b. Cognisant of GDPR requirements, and with a view to supportive interventions where required, academic staff, or units should be able to assess class or discipline attainment data in real time, from a diversity perspective.
 - c. Regular culture surveys should be deployed to assess the sense of belonging of students – tracking this along diversity characteristics.
 - d. Responsive actions should be taken in relation to survey findings.

7. A reasonable accommodation policy for students should be developed to ensure compliance with the Equal Status Acts 2000-2018.

Systemic

8. *Student contribution by postgraduate research students.* We note that the student comments on this policy were universally negative, but that Academic Council has recently voted (in October 2021) to support a recommendation from the Graduate Studies Board for payment in principle for teaching contributions. While work remains to implement this fully, we welcome this decision and the related decision to develop a new code of practice on teaching contributions.

We would recommend that the code of practice on teaching contributions consider:

- a. Disciplines, schools and colleges must be provided with clear guidance on teaching contribution. Teaching contribution is intended to be for the benefit of students, to assist their development; it is not a basis for unfair exploitation or unreasonable workloads. Sanctions should apply where workloads are excessive or unreasonable.
 - b. Flexibility must be built into the system to avoid indirect discrimination. The impact of a teaching contribution requirement on particular student groups needs attention, in particular parents and carers to ensure they are not further disadvantaged by the requirement.
 - c. There should be a clear complaints mechanism that is independent of the discipline, school or college.
9. *Accommodation* – While we are cognisant of the fact that there is a housing crisis, and that as a result all students are experiencing issues in finding accommodation, our research clearly indicates that some groups are particularly likely to be negatively impacted. These include international students, students with disabilities and parents/carers. We therefore recommend:
 - a. The provision of accurate information on the housing crisis, the cost of accommodation and the scarcity of rental accommodation to incoming students, with a particular focus on international students.
 - b. Consideration should be given to:
 - i. The development of student accommodation that accommodates families, or the development of a family-only student residence.
 - ii. Reservation of student accommodation for international students.
 - iii. Additional accessible accommodation units for students with disabilities.
 - iv. Creation of a recommended accommodation list in the Accommodation Office.

- v. The creation of a mechanism for students to report problematic accommodation to the university, and the exclusion of such accommodation from the list of recommended accommodation.
10. *Childcare*. Many students are parents of young children. To ensure we are inclusive of all students, including student parents, we recommend:
 - a. The contract for the University crèche service should include a requirement to facilitate international students arriving with small children.
 - b. NUI Galway should consider the development of short-term, drop-in child care facilities, particularly during exam periods.
 - c. Student exams should not be scheduled outside of childcare opening hours.
 - d. The university should examine the impact of childcare during Covid on student attainment.
 - e. The university should continue to lobby at sectoral level for additional childcare supports for students. NUI Galway should make submissions where feasible to the IUA, the HEA National Access Plan, to the Minister and DFHERIS.
11. *Accessibility* – There has been an exceptional growth in the number of students with disabilities attending Irish HEIs. To ensure the University is inclusive of all students, including students with disabilities, we recommend:
 - a. Campus accessibility must be a priority.
 - b. Learning materials need to be accessible to all students: this includes the provision of material in multiple formats as needed..
 - c. Compliance with the European Union (Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Application of Public Sector Bodies) Regulations 2020 must be prioritised.
 - d. Encourage the up-take of training on inclusive teaching practices and pedagogy by the introduction of unit-level KPIs on UDL training and Ally for LMS.
12. *Complaints Mechanisms* – Students need clear guidance on the complaints procedures available to them. In addition, students raised particular issues that need consideration:
 - a. Introduce clear procedures to enable students to raise complaints about their research supervisors.
 - b. Introduce procedures to provide graduate research committees (GRCs) with the ability to raise concerns about the student supervision.

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