

The transition to higher education changed dramatically for the class of 2020. Researchers at Maynooth University studied the first-year undergraduate experience in this challenging time. This article reports on several important insights from the student responses. The pandemic has dramatically changed these students' introduction to and experience of higher education, both academically and socially. The findings presented here offer insights relevant to all higher-education settings.

In September 2020, just over 46,000 first-year students commenced higher education. These students, unlike previous cohorts, experienced the transition during a pandemic, and a majority began their undergraduate degree experience fully online. During the academic year 2020–21, a team of researchers at Maynooth University (MU) undertook an in-depth case study into the first-year undergraduate experience during this challenging time. This article reports on important insights that emerged from the student responses.

Much has been written about the pandemic and its negative influence on young people's mental health. But our understanding of how first-year students experienced the transition to higher education during this time is limited. This research is timely, because despite substantial literature on the economic returns to higher education, far less is known about the social and academic experience of university life from the students' perspective, unlike in other institutional contexts (Arum and Roska, 2010; Armstrong and Hamilton, 2013; Soria et al., 2021).

This article reports on findings from the first wave of an online survey conducted at the end of semester one with first-year undergraduate students at Maynooth University, aimed at capturing their unique experience of university life and distance learning during the pandemic. MU is an interesting case study because it has the most diverse student intake: the highest share of entrants with a disability (15% compared to the Irish university average of 13%) and the highest share of entrants from target socio-economic groups (29% compared to 24%) (HEA, 2020).

The survey sought to generate a better understanding of university life and the difficulties that first-year students faced during the pandemic and to make recommendations for future actions. It was distributed to all first-year students during

The First-Year University Experience During a Pandemic



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December 2020 and January 2021, and it contained both closed and open-ended questions; 22% (727) of the first-year cohort completed the survey. Though the data collection yielded a marginal over-representation of female, high-attaining, and mature students, the results were reweighted to make them representative of the first-year population. The survey specifically explored five areas, three of which are discussed here:

- The transition to higher education
- Adapting to an online environment
- Learning and belonging in the online environment.

The transition to higher education

The transition to higher education is known to be difficult, and many young people face considerable stress in a points-driven admissions system. Unlike previous cohorts, the first years of 2020–21 did not sit the Leaving Certificate, which was replaced by a process of calculated grades. Over two-thirds of those who came through that process agreed that the changes to Leaving Cert assessment affected their wellbeing and made them feel stressed and anxious about transitioning to university. Higher levels of agreement came from female, working-class, and first-generation students and those who secured lower points than their counterparts through calculated grades. It is likely that these first years have experienced more anxiety than previous cohorts on entry to higher education.

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Considerable effort has been made by the Transitions Group in Ireland to improve the transition between school and university and the links between them, a task made more difficult by the pandemic. Our survey found that a minority of first-year students at MU felt they were still not ready to choose a university course. This was particularly evident among those with the lowest calculated grades. Previous research has identified that some young people, particularly those from disadvantaged contexts, express concern about an absence of information on post-school choices and course options (McCoy et al., 2014); this may have been compounded during the pandemic.

First-year students were divided on the statements ‘The subjects at university build on previous study at school’ and ‘There are clear links between school and university’. Few felt that their ‘final year of education was good preparation for university’. A considerable minority would have preferred to start university with a general first year before choosing a specified course.

These findings replicate those from a nationally representative study of school-leavers who had transitioned to higher education (McCoy et al., 2014). It is likely that the pandemic and calculated grades have affected how students perceived their university readiness. There is also clear social stratification in the structure of opportunity, given that some under-represented student groups are more likely to feel less prepared than groups more typically found in higher education.

When asked about the experience of university versus school, the students were more positive, despite the pandemic. A majority agreed that studying at university is more demanding and also more fulfilling, even during a

pandemic. Those with more resources experienced a smaller ‘transition gap’, meaning that their transition to university was smoother.

Adapting to an online environment

The key challenge for these students was in adapting to the online environment, which, though it offers many advantages, such as technological and personal innovations, also presents many challenges (Adedoyin and Soykan 2020; Besser et al., 2020; Garip et al., 2020). Key objectives of the research were to assess the extent to which first-year students felt they could adapt to the online environment, and to identify the characteristics of students most challenged by this shift.

Given the diversity of the first-year student intake at MU, not all students had previous experience of online or distance learning. This was particularly the case for mature students and those who had transitioned into university from further education. When students were asked how they felt they had adapted to online or distance learning, ‘not at all well’ was the response from a substantial minority of those without experience of this form of learning and from a substantial minority of HEAR/DARE entrants.

Many of the barriers for first-year students were adaptive rather than technical, reflecting findings in the US (Soria et al., 2021). For example, the greatest challenge they experienced was a lack of motivation for remote learning. Fewer cited ‘a lack of clear expectations for online learning from lecturing staff’, ‘a lack of access to an appropriate study space or distracting home environment’, or ‘feelings of an inability to learn effectively in an online format’. Multivariate analyses showed that all else being equal, male and working-class students and those with lower calculated grades were more likely to experience more challenges. A majority cited a lack of interaction with other students as a key barrier, reflecting the importance of relational learning at higher education.

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The online experience also presented opportunities, with a majority of the first-year students indicating positive aspects. Some felt they could now fit learning into their lives more easily, reflecting the findings of the pre-pandemic INDEX survey (NFETLHE, 2020). Positive aspects included having more time to do college work, having more preparation for classes, feeling more productive in completing assignments, and attending classes more regularly. However, all else being equal, first-generation students and those with caring responsibilities were less likely to feel this way.

Learning and belonging online

While staff adapted quickly to teaching online, that environment placed greater emphasis on self-directed learning for students. The less structured a learning environment is, the more self-regulation is required to master several competing tasks and to achieve individual goals (Arum et al., 2021). Our survey did not measure self-regulation or mastery per se, but it did ask students about their use of goal-setting for learning. Goal-setting and self-regulated learning are important for student success (Davis & Hadwin

2021). Goal-setting was common among the majority of our first-year students, but less likely among first-generation and working-class students and those with lower calculated grades, perhaps reflecting the challenge of a less structured learning environment and limited familiarity with the expectations of learning at higher education.

The more adaptable that students are, the more they can relate to learning online and develop a sense of belonging (Besser et al., 2020), which also is important for higher-education retention. In the online environment, a minority of students had developed a sense of belonging to the university by the end of the first semester. Of great concern is that those with the lowest calculated grades or who experienced more obstacles to online learning were less likely to feel they belong to the university community, while those with the highest grades were more likely to feel this way.

A majority of students felt that their relationships with staff and students were more positive than negative. Those with the highest grades were more likely to feel this way about both types of relationships, but first-generation and mature students and students with disabilities were less likely.

Conclusion

The pandemic has dramatically changed the introduction to higher education for this cohort of first-year students. The transition to and experience of higher education remain socially stratified, and these patterns are likely to have been compounded during the pandemic despite an increase in higher-education places. Lower levels of information, resources, and knowledge about higher education and subject content, and an ability to adapt to online learning, are likely to have a bearing on the future experience of university life, both academically and socially.

As this group progress to second year, ongoing actions are required to improve and support their academic and social experience. Though these findings relate to one cohort in a specific university setting, they offer important insights that are relevant to all higher-education settings.

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Brace - the free social rehabilitation platform



Conor Motyer, Founder of **Brace**. Conor developed the platform following a serious sporting injury that he sustained and during which he experienced first-hand the mental toll involved in the injury recovery and rehabilitation process. Photo: Nick Bradshaw, Fotonic

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