Losing the Momentum

Exploring the narratives of disabled students during and after 'lockdown learning'

Introduction

The effects of Covid-19 on the experiences and narratives of students who engaged with higher education in Ireland during lockdown has been exhaustively researched (AHEAD, 2020; QQI, 2020; Doyle et al., 2021). Across this literature, the general consensus is that both students and educators navigated the challenges and emerged relatively unscathed, (Timonen et al., 2021; AHEAD, 2023).

During this time, AHEAD published three research reports that examined the experiences of disabled students as they engaged with 'lockdown learning' (AHEAD, 2020, 2021, 2023). The first two examined how this cohort managed the many restrictions that became synonymous with the period, using year-on-year benchmarking to monitor, track, and compare how disabled students navigated the Covid period. Our final report strove to identify if changes that emerged from the pandemic had advanced any meaningful and permanent transition in teaching and learning practice.

This article synopsises some the principal outcomes of this period for disabled learners. Although the lockdown period is routinely framed as an arduous time, educators, in overcoming the uncertainties, often showed innovation, flexibility, and greater emphasis on accessibility. Students became more comfortable engaging with their studies from home, with many reporting they had developed self-regulatory skills and structure because of the absence of ubiquitous oversight.

To this end, there are positives that may alleviate some of the more pressing issues in Irish tertiary education. This article examines these positives and suggests that many have been overlooked as lockdown restrictions have subsided.

Dr Richard Healy
Research and Policy, AHEAD

Research findings by AHEAD suggest that blended learning can be beneficial for disabled students, primarily because of the autonomy, agency, and choice it offers. Many students with disabilities prospered during 'lockdown learning', and the return to in-person learning has affected this. The benefits and innovative teaching practices that became normative during lockdown learning should be incorporated into how Ireland responds to the continuous increase in disabled students accessing tertiary education.

Gathering momentum

Students' changing preferences for how they engage with learning was arguably the most important finding in our lockdown research. The societal restrictions that prevented on-campus learning led to the introduction of online and blended learning for many students. Though our initial research showed that many disabled students struggled with online learning, in our next report many indicated that they were coping better, finding online learning more accessible, and developing autonomy and agency in how they studied.

Year-on-year comparison suggested that educators were placing more emphasis on accessibility and pivoting away from end-of-term, memory-based assessments as the dominant indicator of progression, a move that was resonating with many students (AHEAD, 2021, 2023). Many of the changes to teaching and learning practices were also argued to be consistent with the principles of universal design for learning (UDL). For many students, the flexibility and choice that underpin UDL fostered a learning landscape in which they prospered:

> There was one module I got an A in . . . it was a lecturer who was really involved with UDL. She gave a lot of freedom in our topics and the ways we were assessed, the formats we used. And it really, really suited me. I really excelled; I would have liked more choice around everything else. (Research participant, Final Report 2021/22)

Many practices that became common during lockdown learning have the potential to transform learning for disabled students. Our final examination of Covid-19, disability, and tertiary education was crucial, as it explored whether any of the changes that were advantageous for disabled students were incorporated into meaningful and lasting change (AHEAD, 2023).

Blended learning, increased use of UDL, and increased emphasis by educators on accessibility, all have the potential to foster inclusive and equitable learning environments for disabled students.

Findings

In this research, which captured the narratives of disabled students in the academic year 2021/22, the data showed that blended learning – a mode that includes both on-campus and online learning – was now the preferred learning mode for 56% of disabled students, with 51% identifying it as the most accessible mode (Figure 1).

Preference for Future Learning Mode - difference between
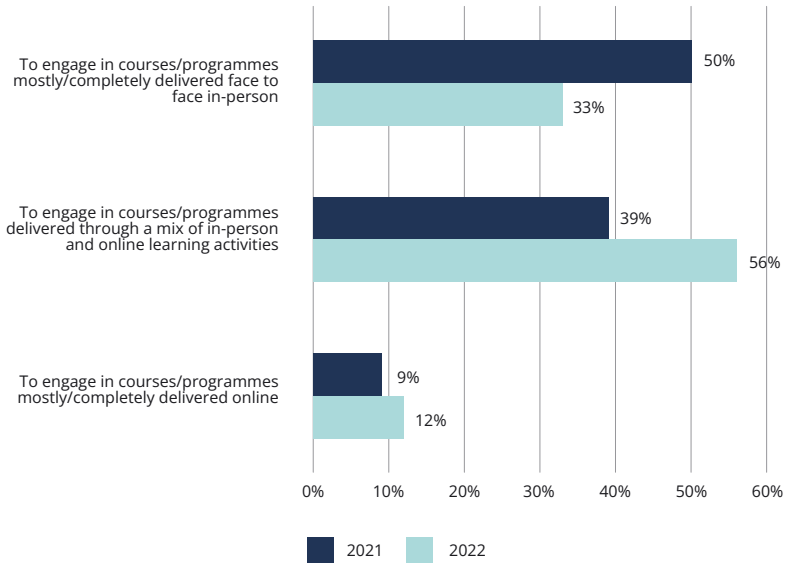2021 and 2022

Figure 1: Students' changing preferences for how they learn

Blended learning, increased use of UDL, and increased emphasis by educators on accessibility all have the potential to foster inclusive and equitable learning environments for disabled students. However, an unfortunate outcome of post-lockdown learning was the incremental shift back to pre-Covid-19 norms. Our research suggests that many of these benefits, which are particularly valuable to disabled students, are now being abandoned, as educators regress to full on-campus learning and teaching strategies with less emphasis on accessibility.

Despite most students' preference for blended learning, most educators (53%) had returned to full on-campus delivery of teaching. The percentage of students who said that accessibility had been considered in the provision of learning materials fell from 47% in 2020/21 to 30% in 2021/22 (Figure 2).

Which of the following best describes how your course/
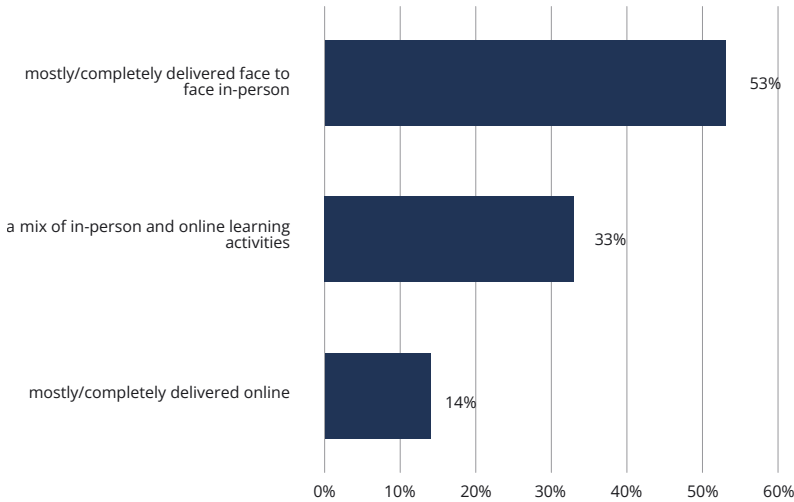programme has been delivered recently?

mostly/completely delivered face to face in-person	53%
a mix of in-person and online learning activities	33%
mostly/completely delivered online	14%

Figure 2: Participants describe how courses/programmes were delivered post-lockdown

Finally, when students were asked about their choice in how their course was delivered post-lockdown, a disappointing 55% said they were offered no choice, and just 8% said they were offered full choice (Figure 3).

In recent months, have you had any choice in whether you
attend your classes/learning activities online or face to
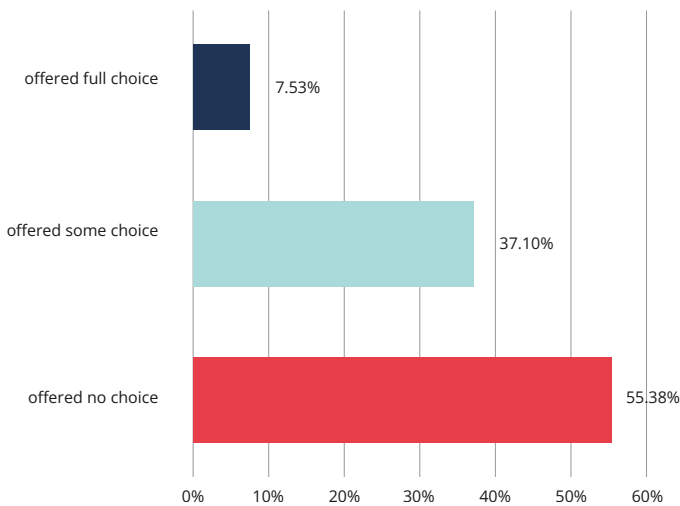face in-person?

offered full choice	7.53%
offered some choice	37.10%
offered no choice	55.38%

Figure 3: Students' responses about choice in how they learned post-lockdown

Conclusion

Our data shows unequivally that any lessons that might have been elicited from lockdown learning have not fostered meaningful change.

Our data shows unequivocally that any lessons that might have been elicited from lockdown learning have not fostered meaningful change. Covid-19 precipitated challenges and difficulties for all of society. While much of the tertiary education sector in Ireland adapted, and emerged from the crisis with credit, the many benefits that could advance a more equitable and accessible environment for disabled students have unfortunately been overlooked.

The number of students with disabilities engaging with higher education in Ireland has increased by 256% in the last 12 years (AHEAD, 2022). The student body in Ireland is not only rapidly diversifying but also continuously increasing, with current estimates of almost 400,000 students and learners enrolled in higher and further education (Healy et al., forthcoming). Disability supports in higher education are currently over-burdened and under-resourced (AHEAD, 2022), and the increase in student numbers and diversity requires a meaningful response from stakeholders. UDL, choice, flexibility, and blended learning are the backdrop for this response.

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