Designing Futures at University of Galway

Promoting student success, engagement, and belonging

Introduction

In 2020, the Irish government, through the Higher Education Authority (HEA), funded 22 projects across Ireland's higher education ecosystem, with the goal of transforming key aspects of students' tertiary-level educational experience. The HEA's Human Capital Initiative, Pillar 3, emphasised a strong focus on the graduate attributes and skills required by industry and society, and for living and thriving in the complex and challenging world of today and tomorrow.

Designing Futures (DF) at University of Galway is funded with €7.57m for five years, 2020–2025. It is designed to achieve key performance indicators across five priorities for higher education. Its central remit is to promote student engagement, success, and belonging, enriching students' experience and helping them develop the attributes and skills they will need to maximise their potential and college experience, and their life and career beyond academe. DF works closely with industry and creative and enterprise partners, including Aerogen, Boston Scientific, Channel Mechanics, Galway International Arts Festival, Mbryonics, Medtronic, Veryan, Rent the Runway, and SAP.

Domains of innovation

Designing Futures' successful proposal conceptualised the five areas of innovation as a connected design, in a mutually supportive configuration. Each DF domain aligns with national and international educational policy and the latest research on how tertiary education should be conceptualised and augmented to achieve important economic and societal objectives, including UN Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education.

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The Designing Futures project at University of Galway is designed to support the development of students' graduate attributes and skills required by industry and society, and for living and thriving in a complex and challenging world. Alongside transforming the student educational experience, Designing Futures is also enhancing faculty collaboration and innovation in teaching and assessment. This article describes how it works

The first domain in which DF has innovated learning and teaching at University of Galway is the IdeasLab on campus. Promoting student entrepreneurship, particularly in partnership with enterprise and society, is vital to higher education. Closer working with the innovation sector and industry, including in co-designing and co-delivering modern, skills-oriented curricula, is centrally important for students to possess the attributes and skills to enable them to fully participate and become future leaders.

At IdeasLab, students tackle real-world challenges while collaborating with industry partners. Through design-centric activities and enterprise-specific programming, students hone their creative and entrepreneurial skills. This fosters empathic understanding and strengthens their connections with industry. One of IdeasLab's flagship innovations, Empathy Studio, won the Galway Chamber Award for Innovation in 2023. Its 'Empathy in Action' module enables students to apply empathy in real-world contexts by collaborating with diverse communities. In 2025, this will expand with a new module in the College of Medicine, Nursing, and Health Sciences.

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The second domain in which DF has innovated higher education at University of Galway is in fostering and promoting learning and teaching across academic disciplines. Complex challenges such as climate change require synthesis of multidisciplinary ideas. Through Designing Futures, University of Galway has developed sustainable transdisciplinary modules (TDMs) that bring together diverse perspectives to address critical global issues, for example the 'From Steam to Green' module on developing sustainable energy.

The third domain is in introducing authentic, research-led teaching, where students work with their lecturers and professors in tackling important research questions. This is modelled on the Vertically Integrated Projects (VIPs) originally developed at Georgia Institute of Technology; Designing Futures is consequently part of the global VIP consortium of higher education institutions. This peer-to-peer style of learning introduces students to a new approach to teaching and assessment, through which they develop key attributes in collaboration, innovation, and research.

Designing Futures also prioritises students' holistic development. Their academic, personal, and professional education are central to the programme. Student Success Coaching provides tailored guidance to help students design their own pathways through university and beyond. This is underpinned by a for-credit Life Design module – the first in an Irish university. Through this element, DF is a member of the international research working group on Life Design, convened by Stanford University's Life Design Lab.

The University Skills Passport is a new innovation in digital credentialing, addressing the need for higher education to emphasise key skills for student success. This software-as-a-service-supported platform allows institutions to

prioritise employer-valued skills across curricular and co-curricular activities. It places University of Galway at the forefront of skill development in Ireland's higher education landscape.

L–R: Tony Hall and Michelle Millar, HEAd'2024 Best Paper Award winners, with Josep Domènech, HEAd general chair, and Giulia Milani, Student Paper Award winner.

Recognition

Of the 5,230 students who have engaged with Designing Futures, 460 have contributed to the DF evaluation research. DF evaluation has also engaged with faculty. The resultant database shows how innovations can be developed in higher education which are directly linked and relevant to the government's published research priorities, including: 'blue-skies thinking' and how we can mobilise transformation in higher education; concrete, impactful examples of how the tertiary sector can contribute to individuals and society; ways to advance strategy for tertiary education, particularly for student belonging, inclusion, and engagement; graduate attributes and skills; labour market needs; and research-led collaborative learning for sustainability.

The scholarship of teaching that underpins Designing Futures has gained international recognition. At the 10th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'24) in Valencia, Spain, in June 2024, Hall et al. (2024a) won the Best Paper Award from over 288 submissions from 56 countries. This underscores Designing Futures' contributions to academic discourse and its impact on global practices (Kernbach et al., 2023; O'Regan, Ferguson, et al., 2023, O'Regan, Walsh, et al., 2023; Hall et al., 2024b; Meade et al., 2024).

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For more about Designing Futures, visit: www.universityofgalway.ie/designingfutures/.

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