STUDENT SUCCESS

UNDERSTANDING AND ENABLING STUDENT

SUCCESS IN IRISH HIGHER EDUCATION

HEA | HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY
AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS

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FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

# Understanding and Enabling Student Success in Irish Higher Education

Report compiled by
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# Foreword

Student success is at the centre of everything that we do in the HEA.  Our approach to funding higher education institutions, agreeing performance compacts with higher education institutions and providing policy advice on the development of the higher education and research system has, and must have, student success at its core.  Student success is our "raison d'étre".

Student success is a complex concept and perhaps traditional perceptions of student success have been too focused on singular outcomes of success.   The reality is that success can mean several things and can be achieved in many ways.  Our higher education system comprises a diverse range of higher education institutions, each with a unique mission and made up of a student population that comes from a variety of different backgrounds and life experiences and with a rich and varied set of skills and talents.  This must be reflected in our articulations of student success.  This report, *Understanding and Enabling Student Success in Irish Higher Education*, recognises that everybody's journey in higher education is unique and success is achieved in different ways and at different times.  Our higher education system needs to embrace this understanding and all stakeholders interacting with higher education need to reflect on their responsibilities in contributing to student success.

This is a milestone report that progresses the substantial work done across the higher education system to achieve a shared understanding of student success and to better support students in having an enriched, engaged and positive higher education experience.  This includes extensive research and scoping work carried out by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in partnership with the HEA, arising from the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, 2015 - 2021 and the specific goal to consider student success for the target groups.  Other important initiatives include the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) that captures students' feedback on their experiences and is a guide for continuous improvement.  In addition, the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) supports student engagement by championing a strong culture of student and staff partnership.

The Department of Education and Skills System Performance Framework for the Higher Education System, 2018-2020 requires all higher education institutions to develop a *Student Success Strategy* that embeds a holistic and whole-of-institution approach.  This report provides evidence-based guidance on developing and implementing these strategies and is a valuable input to support institutions.

On behalf of the Board and Executive of the HEA, I would like to congratulate the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education on this important publication.  The HEA looks forward to partnering further with the National Forum on this key strategic priority for higher education.

**Michael Horgan**
*Chair, Higher Education Authority*

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# Introduction

Student success has many facets and many definitions. It is interlinked with questions about the purpose of higher education, what constitutes personal success and what is valued by Irish society. Interpretations of success vary across many of the key contributors at system, institutional and individual level. They vary considerably among the approximately 250,000 individual students currently in higher education in Ireland (O'Brien, 2019) and will change for many of these over the course of their studies and their lives as alumni.

There are many attempts to quantify success, primarily through metrics such as pass/fail, progression and completion rates. While these may serve as useful proxies that can show how well many of the systems that support student success are functioning, they are not sufficiently nuanced to encapsulate the breadth of individual factors that contribute to a full understanding of student success (Quinn, Thomas, Slack, Casey, Thexton and Noble, 2005). Examples that show the shortcomings of such metrics include the cases of students who are forced to take a leave of absence due to medical, financial or personal factors, but who ultimately return to their institutions to complete their studies, those who may be offered immediate employment arising from their internships or those who make the timely decision to withdraw from a programme that has differed from their expectations in order to pursue an alternative course that is better aligned to their talents and ambitions.

In an attempt to understand the breadth of success, Braxton (2006) synthesised 35 years of research (1969-2004) into eight domains that are indicative of a 'successful' higher education (HE) experience. While even this list cannot give an exhaustive account of the individual goals, challenges and motivations of the millions of students that entered HE during that period and subsequently, it serves as a useful illustration of the breadth of facets of success. The domains identified are:

- Personal development

- Personal accomplishments

- Academic attainment

- Acquisition of general education

- Preparation for adulthood and citizenship

- Development of academic competence

- Development of cognitive skills and intellectual dispositions

- Occupational attainment

Regardless of the perspectives on what constitutes student success, it is clear that it matters. Enabling student success is critical to our national ambitions at an economic, societal and sectoral level. It is essential for institutions in fulfilling their strategic missions and safeguarding their reputations and central to the role of our staff who teach. Finally, it is fundamental to maximising the transformative impact of higher education for our students.

This publication looks at student success through three lenses. Firstly, it explores the concept of student success from the key perspectives of national policy, the explicit strategic missions of our higher education institutions (HEIs), our students and international literature. It then explores a range of themes that have been pivotal to our understanding of student success and how it can be supported. Finally, it looks at the development of an Irish national understanding of student success.

# Part 1: Exploring Success – The Key Perspectives

This section explores the perspectives on, and priorities for, student success from a range of viewpoints that are central to Irish higher education. It begins by setting the context for student success arising from key Irish national and sectoral policies and documents. Secondly, it looks at success from a student perspective, referencing the outputs of a consultation undertaken by the National Forum in 2018 in which 887 Irish HE students explained what being successful in HE means to them. Finally, it explores student success from the perspective of institutions, through reference to their current strategic plans and published graduate attributes.

## Irish Policy Context

The System Performance Framework 2018-2020 is one of very few national policy documents that makes explicit reference to 'Student Success', stipulating that each institution 'will have a Student Success Strategy in place by 2020 which will embed whole-of-HEI approaches to institutional access strategies' (Department of Education and Skills, 2018, p. 15). Despite the fact that the term does not frequently arise otherwise, the policy priorities listed give a clear indication of the perceived role and value of HE, through which the expected results of a successful student experience can be inferred.

The transformative value of HE for individual students, for example, is widely referenced. In his foreword to the Action Plan for Education 2019, Minister Joe McHugh TD states that 'Education and training matter to people. They provide a way to help people realise their full potential, to lead richer lives, and to help our society develop' (Department of Education and Skills, 2019, p. 2). This is also summarised by the Irish University Association: 'Successful participation in higher education has a transformative effect on individuals' lives. It opens more sustainable and better remunerated employment opportunities. It brings greater levels of personal satisfaction and societal engagement. It enables long-term social and health benefits to families and communities' (Irish University Association, 2018, p. 30). A focus on transformation and achieving personal potential is also reflected in documents such as The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014 – 2020, the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Hunt Report) and the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019.

There is a significant focus on skills development and employability as criteria for success. Cultivating a skilled workforce that is attractive to foreign investment is a clear priority for the Irish economy (Action Plan for Jobs 2018, National Development Plan 2018—2027). In this context, student success is synonymous with the development of skills and knowledge that are aligned with the needs of enterprise. These include the capacity for entrepreneurialism and creativity as well as competencies related to ICT, data analytics, languages and international trade (Enterprise 2025). There is also a recognition of the dynamic nature of the world of work and the need to 'take a broader approach to knowledge and to foster the core enabling competencies that will empower future workers in whatever environment they find themselves' (National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030, Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p. 39).

There is a recurrent and significant focus on reflecting and valuing diversity. This is most clearly emphasised in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019, which details national priorities in relation to ensuring that the potential benefits of HE are available to all students and that the student population in Irish HE is representative of the diversity that exists across the national population. Ensuring equality is a key priority in a range of policy documents including the HEA National Review of Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions, the International Education Strategy for Ireland, 2016-2020 and Towards a Future Higher Education Landscape.

The core role of teaching and learning is recognised throughout national policy, with every document reviewed citing its importance. The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education, for example, highlights the 'critical' role that teachers play in helping students to adapt to the HE experience and to raise and achieve their academic aspirations. The Hunt Report, also, dedicates its most expansive set of recommendations to teaching and learning. Much of the literature focuses on the importance of ensuring the continued quality of teaching and learning in our HEIs. The establishment of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in 2012 is further evidence that the enhancement of teaching and learning is a significant priority for Irish HE policy. The fundamental role of the National Forum was reinforced in a comprehensive 2017 international review that described it as 'an essential component of the national-level infrastructure for higher education' (Henard, 2017, p. 8).

There is considerable recognition of the importance of a quality, holistic student experience for the full realisation of student success. Such a student experience is among the priorities recognised by Investing in National Ambition: A Strategy for Funding Higher Education (Cassells Report) and the Irish Universities Association's University Charter. The Hunt Report asserts that 'For students, the informal side of higher education – drama, sport, debating, meeting different people – is a vital dimension of college life that enriches their experience and the quality of their learning environment' (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p. 41).

Funding is recognised throughout the policy documents as an enabler of or obstacle to student success. The Cassells Report and IUA University Charter, in particular, emphasise the impact of funding cuts over the last decade. According to the Cassells Report, 'When quality is compromised, so are most of the other benefits of higher education - the quality of available skills, capacity to address grand societal challenges, access and social mobility, personal development and employment prospects. A return to gradual, marginal, increases in state funding will not be sufficient to create the kind of engaged, small-group, high-trust, high-expectation teaching and learning that underpins quality' (Department of Education and Skills, 2016a, p. 11). The IUA University Charter goes further to reflect on the future needs of the Irish HE sector: 'The third level student population is likely to have grown by 40,000 by 2030. On current trends, approximately 25,000 of these will arrive at the doors of our seven universities. This surge in numbers, arising from the demographic bulge, will place huge strain on a system already struggling to cope, having absorbed 30% more students while funding was cut over the past decade' (Irish Universities Association, 2018, p. 8).

Progression to postgraduate research programmes can also be inferred as an expression of student success from a national perspective, given the prominent role of developing new knowledge among national objectives. Its importance to the Irish economy and society is a key priority throughout much of the literature (e.g. Enterprise 2025, Cassells Report, National Development Plan 2018-2027 and Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025). It is noteworthy that twelve of the specific recommendations from the Innovation 2020 report relate explicitly to HEI research.

Finally, the need for better alignment between second level and HE to better prepare students for the transition to college or university is the subject of considerable focus (Supporting a Better Transition from Second Level to Higher Education, Enterprise 2025, The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014 – 2020 and Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025). Facilitating students' transitions from further education and training (FET) into HE is also noted as critical (Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019, National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019). Finally, the Hunt Report, in particular, emphasises the need to provide incoming students with a positive first year experience that prepares them for their progression through HE.

# Student Consultation

This section looks at the understanding of student success of a large sample of Irish HE students, consulted by the National Forum in November 2018. Of the 1,041 students who responded to the consultation survey, 887 gave qualitative, free text responses to the question: 'We know that people have different ways of thinking about success in higher education. For example, some people think in terms of making friends, or in terms of grades, in terms of making a contribution to society, or in terms of their careers. Please explain what being "successful" in higher education means to you?' Respondents were also asked several demographic questions to enable further analysis. These questions included their gender, stage in their studies, course area and institution type.

The high-level analysis below was carried out in August 2019 for inclusion in this report. The 887 responses were reviewed and coded into themes listed in students' understandings of success. Where a respondent listed more than one factor, multiple themes were coded and included in the analysis. It is noteworthy that nearly 70% of respondents cited multiple themes, showing that success cannot readily be reduced to a single outcome. For example, more of the students who listed work-readiness as a priority (n=329) also included deepening their learning (n=84) than equated success solely with employability (n=77). The themes, a brief description and the percentage of respondents that cited each is listed in table 1.

**Table 1: Student survey responses by theme**

| Description | Response Count | Response Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Developing skills to maximise employability | 329 | 37% |
| Achieving high academic attainment | 327 | 37% |
| Completing award, graduating | 277 | 31% |
| Deepening learning/understanding | 192 | 22% |
| Doing your best, achieving personal potential | 166 | 19% |
| Socialising and making friends | 162 | 18% |
| Developing personal attributes | 115 | 13% |
| Engaging with the full college experience | 115 | 13% |
| Being happy/satisfied | 112 | 13% |
| Contributing to society | 28 | 3% |
| Progressing to a postgraduate programme | 9 | 1% |

It is clear that the instrumental motivations reflected in gaining a career, achieving 'good' grades and earning a degree are priorities among respondents' conceptions of student success. The broad prioritisation of these criteria among Irish students stands in contrast to the findings of a recent study of Australian students' understanding of success, in which themes such as personal validation and exceeding the expectations of others were more prevalent (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018).

While the dominance of these themes was largely persistent among all Irish student groups, there were some noteworthy differences across the demographic groups. The relative differences in responses among male and female students, for example, shows that female students are more likely to emphasise the importance of achieving their personal potential (23% vs 13%), male respondents were more likely to cite work-readiness as a defining aspect of success (44% vs 32%).

Consistent with the overall figures, academic attainment and degree completion are key aspects of success for students from each institution type.  University (n=153) and institute of technology (IoT) (n=707) students differ, for example, in terms of the relative importance of attainment and employability, with 40% of IoT students citing the latter as a critical aspect of success and 34% citing academic achievement. Among university respondents, academic performance is a far more significant theme, with 48% listing grade attainment, and 31% including employability. There are also noteworthy differences across these two cohorts in relation to the relative importance of achieving their own potential (20% vs 14%), and the social and experiential aspects of life as a HE student (17% vs 24% and 12% vs 18% respectively).

By and large, the responses across disciplines are consistent with the other findings, with a continuing focus on degree completion, academic achievement and employability. Noteworthy exceptions to this are as follows:

- Employability appears as a considerably higher priority for Information and Communication Technology (n=88) and Social Sciences, Journalism and Communications (n=39) students (52% and 49% respectively) than for the other cohorts.

- Information and Communication Technology is the only discipline area that included the acquisition of learning in their top 3 priorities.

- For both Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Statistics (n=126) and Services (n=33) students, achieving their own potential made it into their top three priorities. It is particularly noteworthy that, for Services students, this was a considerably higher priority than degree completion (33% vs 21%)

- Services and Social Science, Journalism and Information students were the only cohorts for whom degree completion was not in their top three priorities. As listed above, Services students were more likely to prioritise achieving their own potential whereas students from the Social Science cohort were twice as likely to prioritise making friends and meeting new people than receiving their award (31% vs 15%).

Respondents were also requested to identify the commitments they would like to see their institutions making in their student success strategies. Figure 1 shows that a majority of students identified the themes of enhancing 'Caring/Encouraging/Connected' campus cultures, 'Teaching', 'Facilities (particularly spaces for learning and socialising) and 'Health and Wellbeing' (mental health in particular) as being paramount. Respondents that identified 'Teaching' as a priority focused on requirements such as

providing clear aims and objectives, making use of interactive teaching methods, and engaging and supportive teaching staff. They want lecturers who 'teach rather than lecture', with a 'focus on education (quality of lecturers, tutors, workload and assignments helping with learning)'.

The development of supportive cultures was also a key theme, '[providing] an environment that is conducive to learning, not setting a student up to fail, but instilling confidence and an eagerness to learn'. This sense of a supportive learning environment features very strongly in the responses and is represented in 'Caring/Encouraging/Connected'. Students responded that they want staff and students to be 'kind' to each other and possess good communication skills, which would enable information, services and people to be more accessible. By extension, this sense of the need for a supportive environment continues into the students' prioritisation of mental health support in 'Health and Wellbeing'.
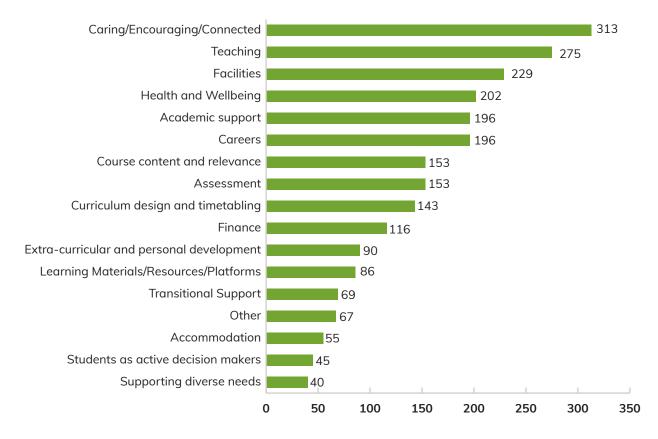


**Figure 1: Student responses on institutional priorities for student success**

## Institutional Perspectives – Strategic Plans and Graduate Attributes

### Strategic Plans

Given their critical role in enabling student success, the perspective of Irish institutions is core for developing a comprehensive picture. In order to gain an understanding of the aspects of student success currently prioritised by institutions, a high-level analysis of the current six university strategies and eight IoT strategies that are publicly available through the Governance section of the HEA website, was undertaken in August 2019. The overarching objectives and specific actions listed that apply directly to students were identified and synthesised to give a coherent picture of current priorities.

It is clear from this analysis that the quality of teaching and learning is an ongoing priority for Irish HEIs. Each of the strategic plans reviewed list specific actions relating to enhancing the quality of their teaching by providing professional development and further supports to staff who teach, with nearly all of the strategies including it among their core objectives. Waterford Institute of Technology, for example, commits to increasing their training budget for teaching staff by 25% to provide additional supports with a particular focus on online, digital and technology-enhanced teaching, learning and assessment.

There is also a recurring focus on enhancing students' employability, with many HEIs committing to strategic actions designed to develop students' readiness-for-work upon award completion. NUI Galway, for example, commit to developing an employability strategy that focuses on 'experiential learning, extra-curricular participation, high-quality work experience, and strong connections with alumni and the world of work' (NUI Galway, 2015, p. 41). Other institutional commitments in this area include enhancing work experience and internship programmes, expanding career services, further integrating work-based learning into the curriculum and developing closer links with industry partners and institutional alumni.

A recognition of the importance of increasing student engagement is reflected in the strategies, as institutions commit to actions intended to deepen students' connection with their disciplines and with the broader student experience. Dublin City University, for example, plans to increase non-academic engagement by developing an Extra-Curricular Engagement Award which aims to 'nurture attributes of civic engagement, global citizenship, enterprise, empathy, and leadership, and [to] stimulate engagement with the Student Leadership and Life-skills Centre' (Dublin City University, 2017, p. 23). IT Carlow commits to implementing a Learner Engagement Retention and Progression Framework which, accompanied by a range of tailored supports, will place a particular emphasis on enhancing the experience of first years. Other institutional actions for enhancing engagement, across the institutions, include the development and promotion of co-curricular activities, campus improvements including the development of social and learning spaces, supports for student transitions and the strategic use of learner data for understanding students' engagement.

There is a clear commitment to improving student-centred supports and services. In addition to developing new services and widening awareness of those that already exist, this commitment also includes reviewing policies and practices to streamline services and ensure a seamless student experience. The areas listed in the strategies include registry, libraries, mental health services and learning supports

The analysis shows a growing commitment, on the part of institutions, to engage in student partnerships, with half of the strategic plans reviewed committing to specific actions to extend the reach of student input into institutional decisions. The University of Limerick's strategy, for example, commits to deepening ties between students and the broader institution: 'to give wider reach to the student voice, we will

introduce new structured interactions between the Students' Union and the University's senior leadership and will ensure that students are represented on all course boards' (University of Limerick, 2015, p.34). The strategies also include actions such as developing deeper relations between institutions and the Students' Union (SU), ensuring alignment between institutional and SU strategies, policies and practices and commitments to enable greater alignment between feedback from the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) and institutional policies and decision-making.

## Graduate Attributes

The development and publication of graduate attributes also provides considerable insight into institutional understandings of student success. Formalising the characteristics HEIs expect to foster in their students gives a clear picture of their goals in relation to their students. Success, from an institutional perspective, may reasonably be understood to be the realisation of these goals. It is significant that institutions use attributes, rather than achievements, to identify the aims of higher education. This clearly demonstrates an interpretation of success as a continuum of personal growth, rather than as an externally-defined line that students must cross.

Broadly speaking, based on the recurring themes across the graduate attributes published by Irish HEIs, institutions consider student success to be related to the following themes:

- **Communication and Influence**
  Each of the sets of attributes makes explicit reference to students' capacity to become effective communicators. They are expected to develop the capacity to convey their message effectively to groups and individuals in a diverse array of circumstances and through the most appropriate medium. Institutions also commit to helping students to develop the ability to use their communications skills to act as effective and ethical influencers.

- **Creativity and Innovation**
  There is an emphasis in the attributes on students' ability to develop creative and innovative approaches to problem-solving. They are expected to be able to apply these approaches in their professional environments, their local communities and as global citizens.

- **Critical and Analytic Thinking**
  Students are expected to have a respect for evidence and data and to have the skillset required to glean understandings from these sources and to make decisions based on an objective assessment of the evidence available to them, as well as being competent at discriminating between reliable and unreliable sources of information.

- **Disciplinary Expertise**
  Foremost among most of the sets of attributes is the expectation that students develop a deep knowledge of their area of study. This expectation is closely aligned to the onus that institutions place on the importance of effective, engaging teaching and learning, as evidenced through the strategic plans.

- **Ethics and Integrity**
  Institutions expect their students to reflect on and develop their own ethical standards and to act with integrity. There is also a recurring expectation that students take responsibility for their own actions and have the courage to stand up to injustice and inequality. Respect for, and compliance with, professional ethics is also a recurring theme.

- **Global Awareness**
  In recognition of the growth of diversity and internationalisation, it is expected that students will be exposed to, and develop the ability to understand and appreciate, diverse international cultures. Students should be aware of international events and their impacts on local communities.

- **Independence and Autonomy**
  This attribute is conveyed through a variety of terms including self-directed, self-motivated and being a self-starter. It is expected that, through students' time in HE, they will develop their capacity to recognise and rely on their own judgement, capabilities and competencies, regardless of the challenges with which they may be confronted.

- **Leadership and Collaboration**
  There is a focus on the development of students' leadership skills and qualities and of their readiness to take on responsibility and leadership roles. At the same time, the attributes also emphasise the importance of students' ability to act as effective and collaborative members of a team.

- **Professional Competence**
  Students are not only expected to have a deep understanding of their subject area, but to evidence development of the skills and attributes they will require to excel in their chosen professions. This also incorporates the development of core competencies which students can use as a foundation for the acquisition of new skills and qualities in a highly dynamic world.

- **Respect for Knowledge and Learning**
  In addition to gaining specific knowledge related to their disciplines, there is a recurring expectation that students should develop an appreciation of the means through which knowledge is created, developed and applied. They should have an understanding of how their discipline relates to other fields and should be well-equipped with the skills and curiosity required to accumulate further learning over their lifetimes.

# Part 2. Enabling Success – National and International Themes

Part One has explored the meaning of student success from a range of key perspectives. This section looks at the major enablers of success, the themes that have been shown to impact positively on students' engagement and achievement of their personal potential, underpinned by a substantial evidence base. These were identified through a structured review of over 60 articles, books and papers pertaining to student success, identified through a Google Scholar search for 'student success' and selected based upon their relevance, age and citation count. This review was undertaken by the National Forum during summer 2019. The themes identified include engagement and partnership, enabling policies and practices, professional development and the centrality of staff who teach, evidence-based decision-making, transitions and belonging, and assessment and feedback. Each theme is described in detail and accompanied by a concise set of actions institutions may wish to consider exploring as part of their student success strategies.

## Theme: Engagement and Student Partnership

Trowler and Trowler define engagement as 'The investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution' (2011, p. 3). They refer to making a deep, personal connection between students and every aspect of the college experience. Engagement is fostered through the development of curricula that are relevant to students' experiences and ambitions, through teachers that are interested in and passionate about their students and their subjects, through institutional cultures that welcome and support their students and foster feelings of belonging and through authentic, meaningful dialogue between institutions and their students. Engagement is recognised throughout the literature as being a key concept for student success (e.g., Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014; Kuh, 2009a).

Student engagement has been positively linked with a broad range of outcomes related to success including deepening learning and development of critical skills (Gellin, 2003; Pike, Kuh, & Gonyea, 2003; Kuh, Hu, & Vesper, 2000), academic achievement (Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, 2002; Zhao & Kuh, 2004) and persistence (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). It has also been found to have a considerable compensatory effect for students from social groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education (Kuh, et al., 2008).

In 2010, Zepke and Leach undertook a systematic review of 93 research studies relating to enhancing engagement. They synthesised these into ten actions that institutions can undertake to drive engagement and enhance student success. These actions are listed below and are addressed in greater detail later in this report.

1. Enhance students' self-belief

2. Enable students to work autonomously, enjoy learning relationships with others and feel they are competent to achieve their own objectives

3. Recognise that teaching and teachers are central to engagement

4.  Create learning that is active, collaborative and fosters learning relationships

5.  Create educational experiences for students that are challenging, enriching and extend their academic abilities

6.  Ensure institutional cultures are welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds

7.  Invest in a variety of support services

8.  Adapt to changing student expectations

9.  Enable students to become active citizens

10. Enable students to develop their social and cultural capital

Developing authentic partnerships with students has been identified as a significant driver of student engagement. Students-as-partners is a 'reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, p. 6-7). In an Irish context, the areas of quality assurance, teaching and learning and governance and management have been recommended as optimal contexts for effective students-as-partners approaches (Higher Education Authority, 2016a).

In 2017, Mercer-Mapstone et al. undertook a systematic review of 65 scholarly articles, book chapters and research papers relating to SaP, through which they identified a broad range of positive outcomes for both staff and students. Benefits for students include increased engagement, motivation and self-efficacy and increased meta-cognition. They also identified many benefits for teaching staff engaged in partnerships with students. These include development of new or better teaching or curriculum materials, new beliefs about teaching and learning that change practice for the better, increased motivation for teaching and research and finding teaching to be more enjoyable/rewarding.

NStEP is Ireland's National Student Engagement Programme. Launched in 2016, as a partnership between the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), NStEP's remit is to develop a national vision for enhancing and embedding student engagement in Irish higher education. It aims to do this by bringing staff and students together to develop a culture of meaningful engagement, to enable collaboration and capacity building and to identify and share best practice (www.studentengagement.ie). The embedding of ISSE, the Irish Survey of Student Engagement, has been another key development in enhancing the focus on engagement across the sector. ISSE provides HEIs with invaluable quantitative and qualitative feedback from students on practices within the institution that drive engagement. Since their establishment, NStEP and ISSE have become core features of Ireland's HE landscape, partnering with HEIs across the sector, driving and facilitating engagement through student partnerships.

There are a range of actions institutions can take to enhance engagement and enable partnerships as drivers of student success. These are listed below.

**THEME: ENGAGEMENT AND STUDENT PARTNERSHIP**
**Key actions to support student success:**

- Ensure that curricula are relevant to students' experience and aspirations and provide opportunities for collaboration and autonomous work

- Encourage staff who teach to embrace participative approaches to learning and to foster relationships with students

- Identify and utilise opportunities to adopt students-as-partners initiatives, particularly in areas of quality assurance, teaching and learning and governance and management

- Maximise the value of ISSE feedback to identify areas of effective, scalable practice and areas with potential for improvement

- Build staff and student capacity for engagement and partnership (e.g. through working with NStEP)

## Theme: A Strategic Approach to Student Success – Enabling Policies and Practices

Part One of this report has given a concise overview of the priorities and drivers of national and institutional strategies and policies in relation to student success. These, coupled with the sectoral cultures that contextualise them, define the environment, both current and future, in which student success is grounded. Culture, strategy, policies and practices can be critical enablers or inhibitors of an approach to success that is optimised to benefit all students. As HEIs set out to develop student success strategies, there are a number of key considerations that have been proven to underpin an effective, sustainable focus on student success.

Development of a truly student-centred focus, which 'does not mean coddling [students], but rather making student learning the lens through which all institutional activity would be viewed' (Kuh, 2003, p. 143) is essential. To be effective, this commitment must be authentic, enduring, institutionally pervasive and driven strategically by institutional leaders. This assertion is supported by George Kuh's review of findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement: 'It is only with the support of presidents, governing board members, academic and student life administrators, faculty members, and students that a variety of coherent, challenging, and complementary educational activities, inside and outside the classroom, will flourish on a campus' (2003, p. 32).

Institutions that have effectively embedded student success have done so by showing their commitment in real terms. They have aligned their internal recognition structures for both staff who teach and those who provide support services to ensure that supporting and enhancing student success is recognised as a key strategic priority (Felten et al., 2016). They have committed the requisite resources to approaches that are designed to support success (Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013). They have engaged collaboratively

with stakeholders throughout the institution to ensure an aligned, coherent, evidence-based approach that avoids 'initiative fatigue' (Kuh & Hutchings, 2015). They have taken meaningful steps to cultivate a campus-wide environment in which every staff member, regardless of their role or level asks themselves 'How does my work contribute positively to students' learning?' (Felten et al, 2016, p. 10) and they have underpinned their approach through enabling policies and procedures that are implementable, situated in practice and reflective of the HEI's priorities (National Forum, 2018).

Developing this shared ethos can be a challenge for institutions that are made up of a host of largely autonomous and seemingly isolated schools and units (Felten et al., 2016). Tinto identifies that, within such an environment, many students experience HE as disjointed and lacking coherence which, in turn, can leave them feeling isolated (2003). This is supported by the recent USI National Report on Student Mental Health (2019) which found a 'lack of coordination between services [that] is causing difficulties for students' (p. 48). Students can become confused by incongruent and even conflicting policies and frustrated by excessively bureaucratic and misaligned practices (Kuh et al., 2006). Embracing student success and a positive experience necessitates a commitment on the part of the institution and its constituent schools and units to review their policies and practices, identify and address incompatibilities and misalignments and prioritise a seamless, coherent student experience. According to Felten et al., 'Thriving institutions transform silos into systems by supporting cross-unit coordination and by paying more attention to the student experience than to how the organizational chart divides up the campus' (p. 172).

The potential for a disjointed experience is not limited to policies and practices but can be housed in curricula as well. According to Tinto, 'most students experience universities as isolated learners whose learning is disconnected from that of others... [they] typically take courses as detached, individual units, one course separated from another in both content and peer group, one set of understandings unrelated in any intentional fashion to what is learned in other courses. Though there are majors, there is little academic or social coherence to student learning.' (2003, p.1). This phenomenon is reflected in students' comments in the consultation detailed in Part One, with the need for better internal communication being a recurring theme; 'make sure topics studied with different lectures do not contradict one another, confusion can arise when topics are not sufficiently linked up throughout a course.'

In response to the challenge of giving students a coherent and engaging learning experience, Kuh lists ten high-impact educational practices that have been widely tested and shown to facilitate deeper learning and engagement: 'when I am asked, "what one thing can we do to enhance student engagement and increase student success?", I now have an answer: make it possible for every student to participate in at least two high-impact activities during his or her undergraduate program, one in the first year, and one taken later in relation to the major field.' (2008, p. 19). These practices are listed below, but institutions should be aware that implementing them is not enough. To be effective, they must be meaningfully integrated into the curriculum and facilitated by staff who are trained in their effective design and deployment (Felten et al., 2016).

- First-Year Seminars and Experiences

- Common Intellectual Experiences

- Learning Communities

- Writing-Intensive Courses

- Collaborative Assignments and Projects

- Undergraduate Research

- Diversity/Global Learning

- Service Learning, Community-Based Learning

- Internships

- Capstone Courses and Projects

Of these practices, a focus on learning communities is particularly prevalent in the literature. These are small groups of up to approximately 25 students (Barefoot, 2004) that are consistently registered and scheduled together into the same module offerings, tutorials, laboratories and practicals. The development of such communities, which may be particularly valuable in large programmes, has been proven to contribute to a range of positive outcomes including increasing student engagement with their learning both within and beyond the classroom, deepening learning, improving student persistence and academic achievement and enhancing social integration (Tinto, 2003; Kuh, 2007; Zepke & Leach, 2010; Felten et al., 2016).

Institutions can further enrich students' experience and enhance success by identifying and addressing the potential infrastructural and logistic challenges that some students may find inhibiting. These include practical factors such as parking, availability of public transport, accessibility, childcare, timetabling, access to wifi and power outlets and the existence of non-commercial on-campus social spaces. It is worth noting that improving facilities, including factors such as these, was a primary theme identified by students as important enablers of success in the consultation in Part One. Identifying and addressing such issues may be a key opportunity for institutions to undertake a students-as-partners initiative, as explored further under the previous theme.

A final institutional enabler of student success is the existence of a range of supports and services that are well-resourced, easily accessible and fit for purpose. As outlined in Part One, these may include the library, learning supports, disability supports, IT support, pastoral and medical services, administrative services, career supports and financial assistance. Such services are critical to student engagement (Pike, Smart, Kuh & Hayek, 2006; Kuh 2007; Tait, 2000), but students may not only be unaware of what services exist or how to avail of them, but can feel that the services are not intended for them or that availing of help is frowned upon by the institution (Quinn et al., 2005). A substantial survey of Irish HE students (n = 1,579) carried out in 2015 found that 'communication of supports is an area which requires improvement for the higher education institutions as it was evident that many students were simply unaware of the facilities and supports available to them' (National Forum, 2015). Drawing students' attention to the services available to them is particularly key given the apparently increasing scale of mental health concerns among students and the fact that 20% of respondents to the Union of Students in Ireland's recent mental health survey reported having no-one to talk to about emotional or personal difficulties (USI, 2019, p. 22).

In addition to drawing students' attention to the supports available, both at orientation and at key points throughout the year, institutions can employ further proven methods for maximising their impact. Learning analytics provides one such avenue; by assessing and understanding the patterns in students' digital footprints, HEIs can identify those who may benefit most from targeted, tailored supports, enabling them to link students and supports 'not "just in case" but "just in time"' (National Forum, 2017a). Quinn et al., (2005) also recommend integrating relevant learning supports in the curriculum. Soria, Fransen and

Nackerud (2013) describe a study at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities which found that students who enrolled in a given introduction to library research module were seven times more likely to return for the following semester. Empowering students to provide effective support for their peers is a further means that institutions can adopt to care for students in need. The recent USI National Report on Student Mental Health identified that 77% of survey respondents would like their institution to provide them with information on supporting a friend that is experiencing difficulties (p. 20).

Some practical steps that institutions can take to ensure that polices, practices and institutional cultures act as enablers of success are listed below.

**THEME: ENABLING POLICIES AND PRACTICES**
**Key actions to support student success:**

- Encourage institutional leaders at every level to show an authentic and public commitment to student success

- Review institutional policies and procedures to ensure they are aligned, enabling and student-centred

- Identify, through student partnership, opportunities for addressing logistic and infrastructural obstacles to student success

- Review institutional supports and services to ensure they are adequately resourced, fit-for-purpose and well-communicated to all students, especially at key times

## Theme: Professional Development and the Centrality of Staff Who Teach

As detailed in Part One, teaching and learning is recognised by students as well as national and institutional policymakers as being at the core of the student experience. This fundamental relationship between teaching, learning and success is encapsulated by Tinto and Pusser (2006): 'Our discussion leaves open, for the moment, the definition of success other than to imply that without learning there is no success and, at a minimum, success implies successful learning in the classroom' (p. 8). As the role of staff who teach is changing from being 'sage on the stage' knowledge-deliverers, to becoming 'managers of student learning and the learning environment' (Williams & Williams, 2011, p. 6), staff can come to feel overwhelmed and underqualified. This can lead to what Kuh describes as the disengagement compact between staff and students – 'You leave me alone and I'll leave you alone' (2008 p. 28).

Given the centrality of effective teaching to student success, the changing nature of pedagogy, and recognition of the need to build capacity and confidence among staff, enhancing teaching capabilities through professional development has become a key focus at both system and institutional levels (Department of Education and Skills, 2019; Department of Education and Skills, 2011).

In recognition of the importance of providing effective, meaningful professional development, aligned with the needs of staff, students and institutions, the National Forum launched Ireland's National Professional

Development Framework in 2016. This values-based Framework, underpinned by scholarship, was developed in consultation with the Irish HE sector and is founded on the values of inclusivity, authenticity, scholarship, learner-centredness and collaboration (National Forum, 2016). The Framework provides a structure for engagement in professional development under the following five domains:

1. Personal Development: The 'Self' in Teaching and Learning

2. Professional Identity, Values and Development in Teaching and Learning

3. Professional Communication and Dialogue in Teaching and Learning

4. Professional Knowledge and Skills in Teaching and Learning

5. Personal and Professional Digital Capacity in Teaching and Learning

The impact of teachers is highly pervasive. Williams and Williams quote Barbara Mc Combs: '"almost everything (teachers) do in the classroom has a motivational influence on students - either positive or negative"' (2011, p. 7). Simple acts such as calling students by name, publicly recognising even students' small achievements and making themselves available for one-on-one contact can 'validate' students and have a tangible impact on success (Kuh et al., 2006). Conversely, failure to provide a teaching environment that is authentic, empathic and encouraging can have a highly detrimental effect, particularly on students from minority groups (Bensimon, 2007). Cultivating a sense of belonging is critical since, as already highlighted, for many students, particularly those who commute or work, the classroom is their only point of engagement with the institution (Kuh, 2008; Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Developing an interpersonal connection between staff and students is a core aspect of fostering students' sense of belonging and, ultimately, their success; 'a sense of connection can emerge if the student has a relationship with just one key person within the tertiary institution and this relationship can significantly impact upon a student's decision to remain in college' (O'Keefe, 2013, p.607). In 2006, Bensimon conducted interviews with students from minority backgrounds who had had a positive, engaging and successful experience of HE:

> 'They spoke eloquently and in detail about an individual—sometimes a teacher, at other times, a counselor or a dean—who had given them confidence and affirmation as well as the academic, cultural, and informational resources they needed to succeed.' (2007, p.442)

The National Forum's student-led, learning impact awards for Teaching Heroes, which gives students the opportunity to publicly recognise teachers who have had a transformative impact on them, has proven a fruitful source of information about the actions and characteristics of teachers that resonate most impactfully with students (National Forum, 2019a). An analysis of the testimonials returned by students in support of their submissions identified key characteristics, behaviours and skills that exceptional teachers possess.  These teachers are entertaining-interesting, kind and caring, supportive, inspirational, passionate and approachable.  They are excellent communicators who create inclusive learning environments where students feel respected and heard.  They take a human approach to teaching and learning, they value connecting with students, they strive to create engaging, active learning environments and they understand the need for students' experience in HE to prepare them for the world of work and beyond.  Teaching heroes show commitment to their students and passion for their subjects.  Teaching Hero awardees were also requested to give reflections on their own practice and a number of further recurring themes were identified. The first of these was a consistent practice of placing the student at the

heart of their teaching practice, identifying the primacy of developing good teacher-student relationships. A further recurring drive is a clear commitment to maximising student engagement with their learning and with the subject. Consistent with the findings of the student texts, effective and varied approaches to communication were also identified as a key theme. Finally, Teaching Heroes were found to consistently value and act upon student feedback as a driver of their teaching practice.

Given the centrality of teachers and teaching to the concept of student success, and the many conflicting responsibilities expected of staff who teach, student success is most likely to be fully realised in institutions that recognise, in tangible terms, the scale of time and commitment required to engage in impactful practices such as understanding and embracing new pedagogies, developing engaging approaches to teaching, learning and assessment and allowing space for interpersonal connections to flourish (Felten et al., 2016; Braxton, 2006; Checkering & Gamson, 1987; Tinto, 2006; Kuh, 2007; Paulsen & Feldman, 1995).

Institutions that wish to embed professional development into their student success strategies may wish to consider taking the following key actions:

**THEME: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE CENTRALITY OF STAFF WHO TEACH**
**Key actions to support student success:**

- Ensure all staff who teach have the opportunity and encouragement required to fully engage with Professional Development Framework

- Encourage all staff to reflect on their role in relation to enabling student success

- Ensure that quality teaching and learning is embedded in staff recognition and reward frameworks

- Ensure all students have the opportunity to avail of high-impact educational practices and that staff are supported and prepared to this end

## Theme: Evidence-based Decision-making

Higher education now exists in a context where information is more prolific and more widely available than at any other time. By harnessing the power of data, reporting and analytics, institutional leaders, teachers and students can greatly enhance their capacity to make evidence-based decisions and take informed actions with a quantifiable likelihood of achieving a desired outcome. Given the increased recognition of these capabilities, there is an increasing onus on HEIs to engage with learner data as an invaluable strategic resource: 'Fortunately, nobody flies a plane across the Atlantic anymore without navigational instruments. Nor should colleges and universities make judgments about the effectiveness of their policies and practices in the absence of student engagement data or some comparable source of information about the quality of the student experience' (Kuh, 2003 p. 32).

Learner data is available to institutions from a broad range of sources including virtual learning environment (VLE) usage, attendance data, library data, assignment submissions, customer relationship management (CRM) systems and quiz software. When compiled effectively, this data can give HEIs a far better understanding of their students' learning behaviour than is otherwise possible. This understanding can, in turn, be used to identify and support students at risk of underperforming, to offer tailored supports and services, to ensure the fitness for purpose of institutional curricula, polices, practices and procedures and to develop more engaging pedagogies (National Forum, 2017a). It is critical, however, that any such use of data is undertaken in full compliance with data protection legislation such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). The National Forum's Online Resource for Learning Analytics (ORLA) comprises a host of guides that are designed to help institutions and staff who teach to maximise the strategic and pedagogical value of such data (www.teachingandlearning.ie/orla). Building institutional capacity to engage with a data-enhanced approach is key. The importance of developing informed, sustainable, whole-of-institution strategies is at the core of the National Forum's Data-Enabled Student Success Initiative (DESSI) which provides guidance and supports to more than 20 Irish HEIs as they seek to maximise the value of their learner and institutional data.

One shortcoming of this data is that it reports only on the behaviour of students. Key understandings such as the depth of students' learning can be harder to quantify. This lack of understanding of the qualitative aspects of the learning experience was a key driver for the development of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh, 2009b). This survey, in operation since 2000, has proven to be an invaluable tool for understanding the prevalence of proven high-impact educational practices in U.S. institutions and students' engagement with them.

The Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) was launched in 2013 in order to gain a better understanding of students' experience in relation to their engagement and learning and to identify the prevalence of recognised good practice among Irish HEIs. This data serves as an invaluable resource to institutions as they seek to identify on-campus practices that are enhancing student engagement and success as well as potential areas for improvement. One of the benefits of having information such as this that gives an overview of the institutional experience, rather than the behaviour of individual students, is that it can be used to maximise the value of institutional interventions by enabling targeted, responsive actions at a macro level that can improve the engagement of many students simultaneously, rather than on an individual, student-by-student basis (National Forum, 2019b).

While having such insights and understanding is invaluable, it is how institutions act on the data that achieves meaningful impact for students and their success (Felten at al., 2016). Defining metrics that are aligned with institutional values and the full understanding of student success is also critical (York, Gibson & Rankin, 2015). In other words, institutions are advised to 'measure what we value, not value what we measure'.

Informed decision-making is also critical for students, particularly at key transitional points such as module registration or major selection, and also in relation to policy or fees implications of, for example, repeating a year, taking a leave of absence or transferring programmes. Clear, accurate guidelines are essential. This is particularly true of HE applicants, especially given the prevalence of 'Wrong course choice' as a reason for premature withdrawal (National Forum, 2015b). This was a key finding of a 2016 study of responses from 331 Irish HE students who had withdrawn from their courses of study prematurely, more than half of whom found that their expectations about college did not match up with the reality (National Forum, 2016). This finding is reflected in a 2005 study of UK students who had also withdrawn from their programmes:

*Almost without exception, students felt that they had made poorly informed subject choices. The process of choosing a university and a course was 'rushed', particularly for those who entered via Clearing, and left many leafing through a prospectus with no real sense of what they should be looking for other than they thought it would be 'interesting'. However, with little guidance from family, university or schools, the reality of the course often proved different to expectations. Families provided support but it was undirected support without a reserve of knowledge about HE to draw on. Families were happy for them to go but often equally as happy for them to withdraw: "Again I didn't really know what I was going into because the prospectus didn't really give me that much of a clue. I know it was a new course, but I just feel that if they had told me what the exact things were then maybe I wouldn't have picked it." (Quinn et al., 2005, p. 18)*

Ensuring that prospectuses and course materials published by HEIs give applicants a realistic understanding of what to expect from their course, and what will be expected of them, is a key step institutions can undertake to enable informed decisions and enhance student success: 'When students' expectations and experiences are appropriately aligned and match the reality they encounter, students are more likely to be satisfied with their college experience and to persist to graduation, a happy outcome for both students and institutions' (Kuh et al., 2006, p. 32).

In order to maximise the value of their data and enable informed decision-making for all parties, institutions are recommended to consider the following:

**THEME: EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION-MAKING**
**Key actions to support student success:**

- Develop institutional data strategies that maximise the value of institutional and learner data as a strategic and learner-centred resource

- Encourage staff who teach to embrace data use as a means of developing evidence-based teaching design and identifying students that may need additional supports

- Maximise the value of qualitative data sources such as ISSE and institutional surveys

- Ensure that current and future students have access to timely, accurate information to enable informed decisions and to foster expectations grounded in reality

- Develop institutional capacity to engage with data as a day-to-day tool for making informed, actionable decisions

## Theme: Supporting Transitions and Cultivating Belonging

In recognition of the importance of supporting students at key points through their HE experience, the National Forum facilitated a national enhancement theme on Teaching for Transitions in 2013-2015. This theme shaped the work of the National Forum and its partners across the Irish sector during this period and provided a focus for funded research projects, seminars and national events. This research included extensive investigation into the transitional experiences of students coming into HE from the post-primary and FET sectors.

As part of this research, 1,579 HE students were surveyed in relation to their experiences (National Forum, 2015a). The findings give considerable insight into the challenges faced by Irish students in coming to terms with HE. Not only did students report the development of the academic skills required to prosper, such as time management, academic writing, critical assessment and research skills as key challenges, they also identified a range of additional factors related to adapting to the broader experiences of HE life. These include themes such as increased personal responsibility, social and personal challenges, non-academic logistical challenges such as commuting and financial pressures and affective concerns driven by the change of scale and practice between post-primary and higher education.

By asking respondents their average grades, this research also identified the relationship between the extent of a student's struggle with the transitionary aspects of moving to HE and their overall academic performance. They found that students who report having had a 'very challenging' experience were 54% less likely to obtain first class honours than students who found the experience to be 'somewhat challenging' (p. 35).

Respondents were asked to identify measures that institutions could put in place to facilitate easier transitions for incoming students. These recommendations were categorised into the four themes below:

1. **Higher Education Supports**
   Respondents stated that they would like introductory classes on topics such as how to take notes, how to cite and reference properly, skills for time management and organisation and an introduction to how academic assignments are graded. Transitioning students would also benefit from further coordinated opportunities for social interaction with peers and staff.

2. **Academic Skills Preparation at Post-Primary**
   There was a strong consensus among participating students that better alignment between the post-primary and higher education sectors would be helpful for easing students' transitions. They state that an increased focus on continuous assessment, critical skills, group learning, personal responsibility and presentation and IT skills in the Leaving Certificate cycle would be extremely helpful.

3. **Managing Expectations and Engagement**
   Many respondents felt that the portrayal of college life from institutional prospectuses, their families and the media over-emphasise the social, participatory aspects of the student experience and underplay the volume of work that was required. In addition to ensuring that institutions give applicants reasonable expectations of the realities of college life, respondents also recognised the need to normalise the challenges of making the transition to HE.

4. **General Skills Preparation**

   Respondents emphasised the additional, non-academic challenges of adapting to life in HE, such as living independently, being away from home and learning to manage their finances. The significance of such factors should not be overlooked, with some respondents recommending that applicants consider taking a year out or undertaking a year in FET to help with the transition.

This study was followed up in 2016 by an investigation into the transitional experiences of students progressing into HE from FET colleges. Although these students largely reported that their FET experience had prepared them well for HE, they did experience many of the same challenges as students progressing from post-primary, such as developing effective time management skills and mastering the mathematics requirements of their studies (National Forum, 2016). Despite these hurdles, 83% of students that transitioned from FET felt that their college experience had prepared them well for their HE experience.

Despite these preparations, many former FET students reported feeling out of place, particularly with reference to social events and group work, due to the age difference between them and many of their HE peers. This sense of feeling out of place is recognised in the literature as a potentially significant hurdle for student success and a key inhibitor of effective transitions. Levin, Rixon and Keating (2019) state that 'In order to be able to succeed and grow through higher education, students need to have the opportunity meet and interact with peers, as well as teaching staff, and feel they are part of the learning community, as learning is a social activity' (p. 72). Such affective factors can have a significant impact on how, and whether, students engage with their studies, institutions, teachers and peers. Bensimon (2007) quotes an African American student's reflections on the impact of feeling out of place at a predominantly white institution: 'Before I came here, I'm like a free-spoken person . . . but here it's kind of hard for me to just speak my mind . . . like I usually do' (p. 454). O'Keefe (2013) identifies the relationship between feelings of isolation and potentially negative outcomes such as under-performance and premature withdrawal. Institutions that wish to fully embrace student success must take effective steps to maximise the engagement and integration of all students who feel that they do not belong; 'according to Heisserer and Parette (2002), 'the single most important factor in advising students who are at-risk is helping them to feel that they are cared for by the institution' (p. 6).

The feeling of not belonging can be particularly prevalent among first-in-family students and can compound a sense of being overwhelmed and unsupported (Petty, 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Thayer 2000; Vuong, Brown-Welty & Tracz, 2010). This feeling of not belonging, although common among first-in family students, as well as students from minority backgrounds, is not limited to such groups. According to Barefoot (2004, p. 13), 'although efforts to target special at-risk populations are necessary, a decision to limit outreach to those populations may be, in fact, short-sighted. Because dropout has so many potential root causes, "average" or even above-average students may also benefit from special assistance during the sometimes difficult transition to higher education.' There are a number of factors identified in the literature as being quantifiably more impactful on student success than students' demographic backgrounds. These include curriculum quality and teacher skills (Williams & Williams, 2011), developing meaningful relationships with staff (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004) and the development of motivational factors such as self-efficacy (Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005).

The body of work by the National Forum on the enhancement theme, Teaching for Transitions, has identified a range of key enablers of effective transitions. These include:

- The key role of disciplines and academic departments in supporting transitions by adopting engaging pedagogical methods and ensuring that students are supported through threshold concepts and the development of discipline-specific skills

- Digital literacy is a key enabler for both staff and students

- Teachers' ability to develop person-centred connections with students are fundamental for driving student engagement and overcoming feelings of isolation

- Institutional supports, both academic and pastoral, are critical. They must be aligned, fit-for-purpose, adequately resourced and well-communicated to students at key times

The curriculum, particularly in first year, is recognised as a key aspect of driving engagement and supporting effective transitions (Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009). The work of Sally Kift has been at the forefront of guiding institutions through the development of curricula that are optimised to support student success. Her work identifies six core principles for developing an effective 'transition pedagogy' that enhances the opportunities for success of all students (Kift, 2009). These principles focus on transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment and evaluation and monitoring. Ensuring that large first-year modules, that are frequently critical to developing students' engagement, are entrusted to experienced and student-focused staff is also a critical step in supporting effective transitions (Tinto, 2006).

Given the importance of effective transitions and cultivating the experience of belonging, institutions may wish to consider including the following relevant actions in their student success strategies:

> **THEME: SUPPORTING TRANSITIONS AND CULTIVATING BELONGING**
> **Key actions to support student success:**
>
> - Liaise with post-primary and FET sectors to ease student transitions
>
> - Develop supports, services and events, specifically targeted to help students to adjust
>
> - Identify opportunities to support transitions through the first year curriculum
>
> - Encourage all staff to be cognisant of the challenges of transitioning to HE and to support incoming students accordingly

## Theme: Assessment and Feedback

*Assessment tells students what is valued and what they need to achieve to be successful in their studies; it captures their attention and study time and may act as a spur; its results inform them of their progress, which in turn impacts on how they view themselves as individuals; and following from these results, it may provide satisfaction or discouragement. Assessment is a major factor in the exclusion and attrition of students so the cost of unsophisticated practice can be high. (Carless, 2015, p. 8)*

Assessment and feedback are key mechanisms, or a key mechanism according to Tinto and Pusser who consider them to be synonymous (2006), through which the expectations and values associated with HE are conveyed to students. According to Felten et al. (2016), they are also the primary means through which institutions encourage students to engage with the process of improvement that is critical to student success. Given the primacy of this aspect of HE, it is not surprising that Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning was identified, through sectoral consultation, as a National Enhancement Theme for Ireland in 2016-2018.

Assessment of learning (National Forum, 2017b) refers to summative assessment approaches such as written examinations that measure achievement and provide a metric through which key decisions, such as progression and award completion, can be enabled. While recognising the learning of students is an essential aspect of certifying students, this summative approach to assessment has some recognised shortcomings. In addition to the anxiety they can cause students and staff due to their high-stakes nature, they have also been associated with motivating students to perform, rather than to value learning as its own end (Harlen, Broadfoot, Daugherty, Gardner, James, & Stobart, 2002). Such extrinsic motivation has been found to correspond to 'shallow', rather than 'deep' learning (Crooks, 1988).

Assessment for learning provides teachers and students with a source of iterative feedback to inform their teaching and learning and help them to monitor progress. As the purpose of assessment for learning is to inform, rather than to measure, it is normally low stakes, in that it either doesn't generate a grade or generates a grade with a low overall weighting, and typically occurs during the learning process. Such assessments are intrinsically linked to the provision of accurate, helpful feedback, which is a central theme throughout the literature on student success (for example: Kuh, 2003; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004; Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Assessment as learning can 'empower students to self-regulate and critically evaluate their learning and performance' (National Forum, 2017b, p.4). It relies on the use of approaches such as self- and peer-assessment and self-reviewing work in accordance with established standards or rubrics to provide students with an opportunity to reflect on and deepen their learning and engagement.

While each of these approaches has their own benefits, it is critical that institutions and staff who teach recognise the importance of, and enhance their capacity to provide, complementary means of maximising the authenticity and value of assessment. A recent study of Irish HE assessment practices by the National Forum (2017c) identified that, although there is a diverse range of assessment methods and approaches in use across the Irish HE landscape, high stakes, summative assessment persists as the most common option, with 61% of the 487 modules reviewed still largely reliant on formal examinations.

The work of the National Forum on the enhancement theme, Assessment OF/FOR/AS Learning, has identified a broad suite of resources to help staff who teach to familiarise themselves with assessment approaches that are proven to deepen engagement and learning and enable success.

(www.teachingandlearning.ie/resource-hub/student-success/assessment-of-for-as-learning/). Key approaches here include authentic and programme assessment.

Authentic assessment is an approach that involves deepening students' learning through involvement in 'real-world' tasks in meaningful contexts (Swaffield, 2011). Potential applications may include musical performance, business plan development, product design projects and engagement in debates (National Forum, 2017d). This method gives students an opportunity to engage with their studies in ways that are relevant and applicable.

Programme approaches to assessment refer to methods that give students the opportunity to integrate the skills and knowledge they have developed across modules, disciplines and their curricular and co-curricular experiences. While implementing such assessments in an effective and valuable way can be highly challenging, they give students an invaluable opportunity to bring together their learning in a coherent, engaging way and can be an effective means of reducing assessment overload (National Forum, 2017e). Examples of this approach include capstone projects, progressive assessment and work- or community-based assessments.

In order to maximise the positive impact of assessment and feedback as enablers of success, there are a number of key actions institutions can take:

**THEME: ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK**
**Key actions to support student success:**

- Foster a common understanding of assessment terminology and purposes among staff and students (i.e. assessment literacy)

- Identify opportunities for reducing institutional reliance on summative, high-stakes forms of assessment

- Enhance meaningful engagement through development of authentic assessment and programme approaches to assessment

- Review and optimise assessment practices at programme level to:
  o    avoid overloading students
  o    encourage diversity of assessment methods
  o    develop coherent approaches

# Part 3: Understanding Success – The Changing National Perspective

Since the consultative identification of student success as a strategic priority, the National Forum has been working to provide structure and coherence for institutions developing student success strategies as required by the HE Systems Performance Framework. This section explores changes identified by the National Forum in Ireland's national understanding of, and focus on, student success. It charts the qualitative changes in the Irish HE landscape that evidence this change and lists the underlying tenets identified by the National Forum's Advisory Group on Student Success, and the ensuing national understanding of student success.

## The Changing Face of Irish Higher Education

*"Student success shifts the perspective of education from product to process"*

National Student Success Think Tank Contributor

In June 2019, the National Forum hosted a national think tank on student success, at which a host of international authorities and participants from across the Irish HE sector explored the changing face of student success in Ireland. This is one of a number of national-level conversations (see Appendix 2 for a detailed list) whose outputs document the move to an iterative student-centred focus in the Irish sector.

This shift in perspective is encapsulated in the quote above, that shows how an emphasis on student success reimagines every process and interaction in higher education and places the student at the core of all activity. It draws HEIs away from the binary understanding of success/failure that is implied through the use of metrics such as rigid completion and progression rates, and towards a recognition that success is a highly individual process that unfolds and potentially changes over the course of, and beyond, the student's experience in HE. The growth of this understanding in Ireland can be charted through the qualitative shifts described below.

## From *Non-Completion* to *Student Success*

In 2017, the National Scoping Group on Non-Completion was re-designated as the National Scoping Group for Student Success. This reframing, undertaken in recognition of the fact that success is too nuanced a concept to be equated solely with degree completion, reflects the changing priorities within Irish HE. It recognises that aiming to address a deficit outcome such as non-completion is not compatible with the commitment required to optimise every aspect of the environments in which our students learn. A focus on improving binary outcomes such as completion/progression rates imposes an artificial externalised criterion for success that may not be consistent with the individual ambitions, values or talents of each student. This recognition of the subjective complexity of success is reflected in the national policies and institutional strategies in Part One that equate success with empowering each student to achieve their own individual potential.

## From *Access* to *Everybody's Business*

*"Move beyond access to success. Access is necessary but insufficient."*

John N Gardner's advice to Irish HE sector

A further shift in national understanding is the growing awareness that the need for services and supports that facilitate student success is not limited to students from target groups, and responsibility for providing such supports does not lie solely within the remit of Access offices. The mantra 'Success is everybody's business' is gaining traction across Ireland's sector and institutions. As outlined earlier, there is now a substantial body of evidence which shows that optimising curriculum quality and teacher skills (Williams and Williams, 2011), developing meaningful relationships with staff (Lundberg & Schreiner, 2004) and the development of motivational factors such as self-efficacy (Zajacova, Lynch & Espenshade, 2005) can play a key role in enhancing the success of all students, regardless of their personal backgrounds or circumstances.

## From *Attainment* to *Learning*

*"Focus on learning... Learning trumps all. That's what everyone comes for and learning lives in the curriculum."*

Sally Kift's advice to Irish HE sector

Learning, like success, is an iterative process. Here, the national focus has already shifted from product to process. This is readily evidenced in the national policies and institutional strategies reviewed in Part One. These consistently prioritise the process of learning, rather than readily quantifiable products, such as grades or academic attainment. Even a cursory glance at national policies emphasises this. The word 'learning', for example, appears 312 times in selected key policy documents (the National Strategy for Higher Education To 2030, the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education and the HE System Performance Framework). The word 'attainment', conversely, only appears 21 times. The word 'grades' does not feature.

## From *Retention* to *Engagement*

*"Partnership is the only universal aspect of student success... Success is everyone's business and depends on a genuine and meaningful partnership"*

Katie Deegan, President Elect of Maynooth University Students' Union

The move away from binary understandings of success is also evidenced by an increasing focus on student engagement, contrasting with a reducing emphasis on retention. National initiatives such as NStEP and ISSE are representative of this shift; these programmes prioritise working in partnership with students to optimise the learning environment, not merely seeking to ensure that students do not withdraw. They are now a core feature of the Irish HE landscape and have proven to be considerable enablers of a partnership-driven approach to student success.

## Developing a Shared Understanding

Given the complexity and contextual dependencies of success that have been described, an impactful, sectoral approach to student success requires a shared understanding as a critical first step. The development of such an understanding is required to enable a common focus and shared goal for a multiplicity of conditions that need to align effectively.

Given this context, and the wealth of contributions of the groups that have gone before and informed it, the Student Success Advisory Group has, over the course of 2019, refined an understanding of student success that is founded on the following core tenets, developed through national conversations and the reviewed literature:

- Success can only be facilitated through meaningful partnership and engagement between students and staff and between all levels of the HE sector

- Success means empowering students to recognise and achieve their own potential

- It is the responsibility of those working across the HE sector to identify and remove any obstacles that may hinder students from achieving their own benchmark of success

- Success is not binary and cannot be fully encapsulated in metrics such as retention and progression rates. It reframes the perspective from product to process, from an approach driven by output metrics to one that is enabled by ongoing quality enhancement

- Success is too highly nuanced and individualised to be concisely defined. It can, nonetheless, be understood and facilitated

- Success requires whole-of-institution approaches.

The advisory group sought to merge these shifts and tenets into a single expression of success that could support a shared, national understanding that every constituent part of HE could recognise and work towards. This single, concise statement encompasses the panoramic range of perspectives that have contributed to, and continue to inform, the drive for enabling student success that is at the heart of our work as a national sector:

*Student success optimises the learning and development opportunities for each student to recognise and fulfil their potential to contribute to, and flourish in, society.*

*To be achieved, this requires a culture in Irish higher education that values inclusivity, equity and meaningful engagement between students, staff, their institutions and the wider community.*

# Conclusion

Student success is a simple concept. At its core is a belief in the capability of HE to give each student the support they need to recognise and fulfil their potential. Aligning and optimising the broad range of factors that are required to achieve this, however, is a significant task, particularly in a world of limited time, finite resources and conflicting priorities.

It can be realised, however. Ours is a sector abundant with commitment, expertise and a genuine concern for students' well-being. All that is required is for each contributor to play their part in ensuring it is well-structured, informed by recognised good practice and wholly committed to a student-centred focus.

At system level, it requires national policies and priorities that emphasise the centrality of students and learning and recognise that student success requires a process rather than an output focus. It is dependent upon an aligned and adaptable national education system that is optimised to cater for individualised routes from post-primary and FET into, through and across the higher education sector. This needs to be underpinned by funding models that give students the flexibility to define personalised, non-standard routes to their own success and empower institutions to adopt innovative, fit-for-purpose strategies for supporting them.

Success, led by managers at every level, requires institutions to demonstrate an ongoing, authentic commitment to a student-centred focus, reinforced as a genuine priority through appropriate funding, resourcing and recognition and reward procedures. It needs evidence-based, whole-of-campus cultures in which every staff member is encouraged to reflect on, commit to and enhance their role in engaging and supporting students. It is enabled by policies and procedures that have been reviewed and optimised through the lens of students' experience and by practices that are aligned to ensure a seamless student experience.

Success is bred in academic departments that recognise the role of curricula in engaging students and facilitating successful transitions and develop and structure them accordingly. It thrives in schools that value and encourage good teaching, effective assessment and meaningful partnerships with students and colleagues from throughout the institution and beyond the sector. It requires these areas to act as the building blocks upon which a pervasive student-centred institutional culture is realised.

It needs students that are engaged, autonomous and committed, full partners in their education who are empowered to make informed decisions with accurate expectations of the consequences.

Student success is most likely to thrive in a higher education sector whose staff, regardless of their role, consider themselves, first and foremost, to be enablers of student success. It is founded on individual staff who are committed, enthusiastic, student-focused and whose work is informed by evidence-based good practice and continuous professional development. It requires every staff member at all levels of the sector to reflect on their own role and whether their actions either directly or indirectly act to facilitate students or to complicate their journey to success.

We, and our students, are fortunate to operate in a sector that already has many such people.

Finally, we need to appreciate that the student body is not a homogeneous, anonymised constituency within the institution but is a collective of individuals with unique needs, motivations, contexts and ambitions. An effective approach to student success challenges national policy makers, institutions, academic units and staff to provide a holistic, respectful, person-centred learning environment.

Ultimately, perhaps the goal should not be student success, but students' success, that may be found in the most surprising places. In the words of one student contributor:

*'Being "successful in a higher education" is not something that's ever struck my mind. I am currently on the brink of dropping out and on my second course that I have failed... [but,] in my eyes from the bottom that I am at right now, I've never understood the academic system so much. I learned so much about success in the higher education system that I will and have started putting to work. Success is asking for help. Success is planning. Success is confidence. Success is winning. Success is feeling. Success is knowing. And success is sharing. There's nothing in life that we are born to do on our own. There will always be times when we need even the littlest of help on our journey... Success is fighting through the most difficult stage and keep pushing forward.'*

# Acknowledgements

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# Appendix 1: Student Consultation Data

This section shows the responses from students to the National Forum's consultation in 2018 (n=887). The tables show students' responses to the question: '*We know that people have different ways of thinking about success in higher education. For example, some people think in terms of making friends, or in terms of grades, in terms of making a contribution to society, or in terms of their careers. Please explain what being "successful" in higher education means to you?*'

**Table 1: Student survey responses by theme**

| Description | Response Count | Response Percent |
|---|---|---|
| Developing skills to maximise employability (Career) | 329 | 37% |
| Achieving high academic attainment (Grades) | 327 | 37% |
| Completing award, graduating (Degree) | 277 | 31% |
| Deepening learning/understanding (Learning) | 192 | 22% |
| Doing your best, achieving personal potential (Best) | 166 | 19% |
| Socialising and making friends (Social) | 162 | 18% |
| Developing personal attributes (Growth) | 115 | 13% |
| Engaging with the full college experience (Experience) | 115 | 13% |
| Being happy/satisfied (Happy) | 112 | 13% |
| Contributing to society (Society) | 28 | 3% |
| Progressing to a postgraduate programme (Postgrad) | 9 | 1% |

**Table 2: Count of themes per response**

| Count of Themes per Response | Percentage of Respondents |
|---|---|
| 1 | 31% |
| 2 | 38% |
| 3 | 22% |
| 4 | 6% |
| 5 | 2% |

**Table 3: Response themes by gender**

| Theme | Female | | Male | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Grades | 230 | 43% | 93 | 27% |
| Career | 172 | 32% | 153 | 44% |
| Degree | 163 | 31% | 111 | 32% |
| Best | 120 | 23% | 45 | 13% |
| Learning | 117 | 22% | 74 | 21% |
| Social | 108 | 20% | 52 | 15% |
| Happy | 79 | 15% | 32 | 9% |
| Experience | 72 | 14% | 42 | 12% |
| Growth | 68 | 13% | 46 | 13% |
| Society | 16 | 3% | 12 | 3% |
| Postgrad | 5 | 1% | 4 | 1% |

**Table 4: Response themes by institution type**

| Theme | Institute of Technology | | College of Education | | University | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Career | 279 | 40% | 3 | 12% | 48 | 31% |
| Grades | 243 | 34% | 10 | 40% | 74 | 48% |
| Degree | 214 | 30% | 12 | 48% | 51 | 33% |
| Learning | 158 | 22% | 5 | 20% | 28 | 18% |
| Best | 138 | 20% | 6 | 24% | 22 | 14% |
| Social | 122 | 17% | 3 | 12% | 37 | 24% |
| Happy | 91 | 13% | 2 | 8% | 19 | 12% |
| Growth | 90 | 13% | 4 | 16% | 21 | 14% |
| Experience | 84 | 12% | 3 | 12% | 28 | 18% |
| Society | 20 | 3% | 1 | 4% | 7 | 5% |
| Postgrad | 7 | 1% | 0 | 0% | 2 | 1% |

**Table 5: Response themes by stage of study**

| Theme | UG Final | | UG First | | UG Other | | PG Research | | PG Taught | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Grades | 89 | 45% | 92 | 32% | 130 | 38% | 4 | 15% | 12 | 32% |
| Career | 77 | 39% | 99 | 34% | 128 | 38% | 10 | 38% | 15 | 41% |
| Degree | 68 | 35% | 89 | 31% | 107 | 31% | 3 | 12% | 10 | 27% |
| Best | 41 | 21% | 61 | 21% | 54 | 16% | 3 | 12% | 7 | 19% |
| Learning | 41 | 21% | 54 | 19% | 71 | 21% | 9 | 35% | 17 | 46% |
| Social | 38 | 19% | 54 | 19% | 61 | 18% | 7 | 27% | 2 | 5% |
| Growth | 26 | 13% | 37 | 13% | 45 | 13% | 3 | 12% | 4 | 11% |
| Happy | 19 | 10% | 44 | 15% | 41 | 12% | 5 | 19% | 3 | 8% |
| Experience | 19 | 10% | 40 | 14% | 49 | 14% | 5 | 19% | 2 | 5% |
| Society | 8 | 4% | 7 | 2% | 8 | 2% | 3 | 12% | 2 | 5% |
| Postgrad | 4 | 2% | 1 | 0% | 4 | 1% | | 0% | | 0% |

**Table 6: Response themes by discipline**

| Theme | AG,FOR, FISH, VET | ARTS | BUS, ADMIN, LAW | EDUCATION | ENG, MANU, CONS | HEALTH & WELFARE | ICT | SCI, MATH, STAT | SERVICES | SOCSCI, JOURN, INFO |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Degree | 39% | 33% | 32% | 39% | 31% | 35% | 26% | 32% | 21% | 15% |
| Grades | 28% | 39% | 43% | 40% | 23% | 35% | 32% | 41% | 33% | 41% |
| Career | 28% | 41% | 39% | 23% | 44% | 30% | 52% | 28% | 27% | 49% |
| Learning | 22% | 29% | 18% | 21% | 14% | 26% | 26% | 22% | 15% | 21% |
| Best | 17% | 22% | 21% | 21% | 8% | 13% | 11% | 28% | 33% | 13% |
| Social | 17% | 28% | 19% | 19% | 11% | 15% | 13% | 17% | 15% | 31% |
| Experience | 17% | 18% | 12% | 13% | 7% | 15% | 10% | 13% | 12% | 21% |
| Happy | 11% | 15% | 10% | 19% | 17% | 14% | 7% | 12% | 9% | 10% |
| Growth | 6% | 21% | 9% | 14% | 10% | 16% | 18% | 7% | 12% | 21% |
| Society | 0% | 3% | 2% | 7% | 6% | 4% | 1% | 2% | 0% | 8% |
| Postgrad | 0% | 2% | 0% | 3% | 1% | 3% | 1% | 0% | 0% | 0% |

# Appendix 2: National Conversations Contributing to Understanding of Success

This section lists the national conversations that contributed to the tenets and understanding of student success in Part Three.

### National Student Success Scoping Group

This group, arising from a HEA national working group on non-completion, staged three scoping workshops in summer 2017 to develop an understanding of success and to identify means of building national capacity to support it. These highly collaborative sessions were attended by over 30 contributors representing a wide range of interested cohorts including students, staff who teach, staff from access offices, staff from support units, institutional leaders and careers guidance counsellors. National organisations including the Department of Education and Skills, the HEA, QQI, AHEAD, the National Forum, the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) were also represented.

### Interviews with Senior Managers

Also in 2017, the National Forum undertook a number of structured interviews with senior institutional leaders in order to gain an insight into the perspectives on student success from these key stakeholders. Two registrars from Irish universities and two registrars from Irish institutes of technology were involved. As part of the interviews, these institutional leaders were asked to share their understanding of student success and to outline the key features required at system, institutional and school/department/faculty level to fully enable success.

### National Student Success Workshop

Under the title 'Success is Everybody's Business', this event was hosted by the HEA and facilitated by the National Forum in May 2018. Attended by over 50 students and institutional and system-level staff, this event sought to continue the national conversation about success, with a particular focus on the development of institutional strategies and cultures that embed student success as a key focus of the entire HEI.

### National Forum Student Success Advisory Group

In 2018, the National Forum undertook an extensive consultation with the Irish HE sector to identify the key drivers that should inform its strategy for the period 2019-2021. This process culminated in the identification of four strategic priorities that would be the focus of the National Forum's work. These priorities are:

- The Professional Development of All Who Teach

- Teaching and Learning Enhancement Within and Across Disciplines

- Teaching and Learning in a Digital World

- Student Success

In order to inform the National Forum's work in these areas, a national advisory group was established under each strategic priority. The Student Success Advisory Group comprises a balance of student

representatives and representatives of staff from across institutions. Many of its members have been actively involved in the national conversations on student success listed above. The aims of this group are to develop a national understanding of student success and to assist the National Forum in the development of resources to build sectoral capacity to focus on and enhance success.

## National Think Tank on Student Success

In summer 2019, Cork Institute of Technology hosted the European First Year Experience (EFYE) Conference. This event saw delegates from institutions across the world come together to discuss the critical role of students' first year in laying the foundations of student success. The event included a post-conference workshop on student success, designed to give national and international experts an opportunity to collaboratively contribute to the development of Irish strategies for supporting student success. Participants at this event included a range of internationally-recognised authorities on various aspects of the student experience including Dr John N Gardner, Dr Betsy O Barefoot, Professor Sally Kift, Professor Sally Brown, Dr Michelle Morgan, Professor Phil Race and Dr Diane Nutt.

The think tank, which was attended by over 80 participants, was launched by Irish Minister for Education Joe McHugh T.D., who emphasised the importance of student success as a national priority. Following this video address, the event's key speakers were invited to give advice to Irish HE on the key aspects of establishing a national approach to student success:

> *Move beyond access to success. Access is necessary but insufficient. Access institutions are different from successful institutions. Must avoid one-size-fits-all or it will only serve the top institutions. Statements [on student success] must include values.*
> **Dr John N Gardner**

> *Focus on learning. Don't get caught up on diversity. Learning trumps all. That's what everyone comes for and learning lives in the curriculum. Everything has the power to engage or disengage. We need clear ideas of what assessment means. Let students see others who have been successful.*
> **Professor Sally Kift**

> *Advocate for the importance of higher education. Don't assume everyone believes that HE is important. Advocate for importance of first year and quality of the experience. Avoid 'look to the left and right' [at orientation, to identify students that will not complete their awards]. Students are different today. They need support, not an absurd kind of challenge.*
> **Dr Betsy O Barefoot**

> *Be willing to work with other people you don't like, find tricky, don't naturally agree with. Work with everyone and anyone to improve the experience of your students.*
> **Dr Diane Nutt**

> *I'd never heard of 'student success' before the [National Forum] advisory group. Why aren't we talking about this more? Student partnership was the first thing I thought of in relation to success. Partnership is the only universal aspect of student success. We need a policy that comes to life, meaning success is at the heart of our institutional decisions and pervades entire campuses. Contact your students and student representatives for advice on how you can improve student success. I welcome the Minister's support but I must call on the government to fund the future and put supports in place to support all students regardless of background. Success is everyone's business and depends on a genuine and meaningful partnership.*
> **Katie Deegan (President-elect of Maynooth University Students' Union)**

STUDENT SUCCESS

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

Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

HEA | HIGHER EDUCATION AUTHORITY
AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS