

Student Engagement in a Digitally Mediated Environment: Attitudes and Experiences of Student Advisers

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Abstract

Students' healthy engagement with higher education (HE) can make vital contributions to their psychosocial development, educational attainment and future employability. However, it is important to note that how engagement is enabled, experienced, and assessed within Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) is evolving. This shift is evidenced in the growing interconnectivity between HEIs' interpersonal and digital engagement resources. Alongside this, staff and students' reliance on digital mediation, in which digital technologies are used to facilitate and sustain student communications, has grown exponentially across academic, advisory, and administrative domains in the wake of COVID-19. In light of this growing demand for digital mediation and its increased prominence within HE student supports, our project undertakes a qualitative exploration of Student Advisers' experiences working in the interface between interpersonal and digital-engagement resources. We examine their experiences of and attitudes towards student engagement; their insights into the proliferation of digital communications and the challenges and opportunities this has entailed; and how they have sought to ensure service continuity amid such rapid transformations. By deconstructing the dichotomy between digital and interpersonal supports and recontextualising them within Student Advisers' lived experience, we aim to re-evaluate the nature and role of student engagement against the needs currently facing the HE sector. Here, we critique digital mediation's role within, and impact on, HEIs, arguing that digital supports and resources should seek to enhance interpersonal encounters rather than replace them.

Keywords: Student Engagement, Student Advisor, Digital Mediation, Blended Learning, Student Support

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Introduction

Students' engagement with their higher education institution (HEI) is pivotal to their psychosocial development and is predictive of educational attainment (Balwant, 2018; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kahu, Stephens, Leach, & Zepke, 2015; Macey & Schneider, 2008) and employability (Ehiyazaryan-White & Barraclough, 2009). Amidst calls to ensure that student engagement is holistic (Pickford, 2016), we witness changes in how it is enabled and experienced across academic, advisory, and administrative domains. Heightened reliance on digitally-mediated student-staff interactions in the wake of COVID-19 reflects the ever-evolving range of 'dynamic capabilities' (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997) possessed by HEIs. This is attributable, at least in part, to the proliferation and adoption of technological innovations (Karkouti & Bekele, 2019).¹ Thus, alongside the numerous opportunities for educational and social interaction that HEIs provide within their lecture halls, work placements, societies and events, exchanges between staff and students are now enabled digitally.

Against this background, it is important to re-evaluate the nature and role of "student engagement" within HEIs, recontextualising this concept within the domain of students' needs and the broader higher education (HE) sector. In this research project, we undertake a qualitative exploration of Student Advisers' (SAs') experiences and insights into this concept as they have sought to maintain and manage service provision during this time of unprecedented change. Deconstructing the dichotomy between digital and in-person engagement, and reframing these forms of interaction as existing on an interpersonal continuum, we explore the status that digital mediation now holds within the broad ambit of student supports. We examine how SAs have sought to deliver supports, their understanding of the challenges and opportunities underpinning recent HEI changes, and what lessons they have learned in adopting and integrating digital tools into student interactions. Here, SAs' professional and personal experiences can help reveal how students respond to remote and "blended" engagement strategies and how HEIs can build on these recent experiences as they seek to continue innovating student supports and resources following the (anticipated) recommencement of in-person attendance.²

Understanding and Fostering Student Engagement

Student engagement is a recurrent theme within contemporary research into the principles and practices underpinning HE. Noted as 'a defining characteristic of high quality teaching and learning' (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015), this concept offers insights into how to promote students' healthy participation in and successful outcomes from their HE experience. Kuh (2001) describes student engagement as 'Participating in educational practices that are strongly associated with high levels of learning and personal development'. Conceptually and experientially, engagement is a dynamic concept, occurring when students are 'understanding the material' and 'incorporating or internalising it in their lives' (NCESS, 1992). It is achieved across numerous domains within students' 'educational interface' (Kahu & Nelson, 2018);

¹ Teece et al (1997) define dynamic capabilities as 'the ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address the rapidly changing environments'.

² This research project is part of the Higher Education Authority (HEA)-funded cross-institutional project between University College Dublin (UCD) and Dublin City University (DCU) "Supporting Student Success: A Collaborative Approach to Enhancing Engagement, Employability and Life Skills". This project aims to align digital and interpersonal resources that will facilitate the provision of personalised interventions for students who may be disengaging from their programme, thus positively influencing their development, progression and retention.

Krause (2011) states that ‘learning occurs in a range of settings, both within and beyond the formal curriculum’.

Student engagement is frequently described as being multi-dimensional, comprised of distinct-yet-related capacities that, when positively attended to and expressed, coalesce to create a holistic experience. Drawing on the literature, we present provisional descriptions of five such components of engagement (Blumenfeld et al., 2005; Bowden, Tickle, & Naumann, 2019; Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012; Eldegwy, Elsharnouby, & Kortam, 2018; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Fried & Konza, 2013; Kahu et al., 2015; Khademi Ashkzari, Piryaei, & Kamelifar, 2018; Klem & Connell, 2004; K. L. Krause & Coates, 2008; G. Kuh, 2006; Lay-Hwa Bowden, 2013; Mahatmya, Lohman, Matjasko, & Farb, 2012; NCESS, 1992; Nguyen, Cannata, & Miller, 2016; Reeve, 2012, 2013; Reeve & Shin, 2020; Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-romá, & Bakker, 2002; Vivek, Beatty, Dalela, & Morgan, 2014; Wentzel, 2012; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012):

- i. Cognitive Engagement: The student’s active, attentive, psychological investment in their learning process. This is expressed through self-regulating one’s learning and mentally exerting oneself when acquiring, apprehending and comprehending the knowledge and skills necessary to advance subject mastery.
- ii. Behavioural Engagement: The student’s active, external participation in their learning and development activities. This is expressed through conducting oneself productively and being an involved member of one’s HEI across academic and extracurricular pursuits, alongside performing in academic assessments.
- iii. Affective Engagement: The student’s feeling of being personally connected with and emotionally invested in their HE experience. This is expressed through valuing and cultivating the role that one’s HEI experience has in one’s life, including being enthusiastic and optimistic about its worth and outcomes.
- iv. Social Engagement: The student’s feeling of identifying with, and healthily interacting with, significant others within their HE experience. This is expressed through becoming socially embedded within and developing a sense of belonging and inclusiveness towards one’s HE social context.
- v. Agentic Engagement: The student’s intentional, constructive efforts to shape their teaching and learning experience. This is expressed through proactively participating in reciprocal transactions with others across relevant domains and collaborating on the nature of the educational experience.

Broadly, these components of engagement centre around students’ discovery, utilisation and development of their personal and environmental resources to optimally participate in their HE experience. Therefore, at its heart, engagement pivots on students forming a constructive relationship with their educational community (Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012) – an embedded undertaking, shaped by the active interplay between students’ internal self and their external environment (Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2009; Fredricks et al., 2004; Kahu, 2013; Phan, 2014).

The NCESS (1992) note that engagement occurs when ‘Students make a psychological investment in learning... They take pride not simply in earning the formal indicators of success (grades), but in understanding the material and incorporating or internalising it in their lives’. However, this investment is not solely students’ responsibility; HEIs also need to create an environment conducive to students’ participation (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). Given the reciprocal role that students and institutions play in fostering engagement, the agency students accrue throughout their HE journey is not synonymous with complete independence. Instead,

it emerges through navigating the various interpersonal challenges and opportunities entailed in being an active and embedded participant; ‘engagement needs to be considered within personal, dynamic student ecosystems’ (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Here, a key role of student advisory services is to help students establish and maintain meaningful relationships with significant others in their academic hinterland, including peers and staff (Fergy, Marks-Maran, Ooms, Shapcott, & Burke, 2011).

HEIs have made engagement a more explicit component of course design and delivery as our understanding of the interpersonal and environmental factors underpinning student attendance and attainment continues to evolve. Given that the meaning of engagement, and the means through which it is achieved, may vary from student to student and cohort to cohort, it is vital that SAs are responsive to evolving student needs and preferences, and adapt engagement opportunities accordingly. Notably, when students may be lacking in the inherent benefits accrued from in-person attendance, supports and resources must continue to be made available to students, who should be educated and empowered to seek out and avail of them.

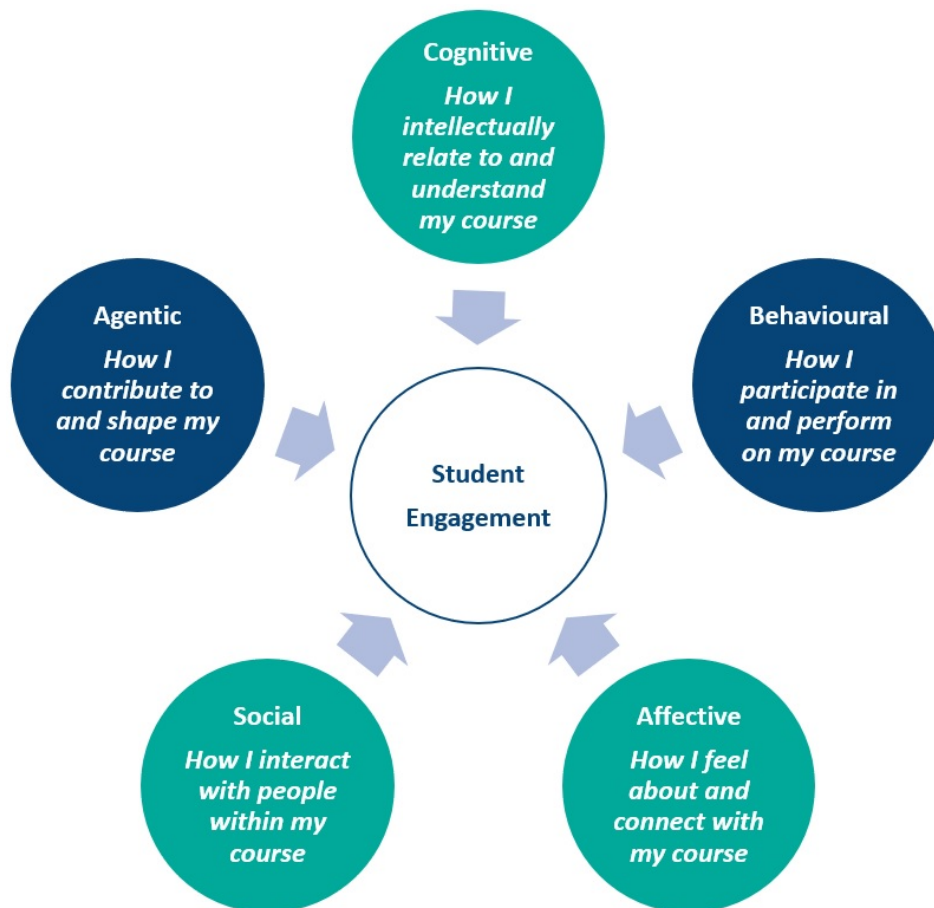


Figure 1. The Core Components of Student Engagement

Delivering Higher Education Supports: The Student Adviser

The mission statements of HEIs in Ireland tend to place students at their core and emphasise the expectation that students receive a holistic education, leading to the creation of civic-minded individuals ready to contribute to wider society (see, for example, (University College Dublin, 2020). Within these strategic documents, the student is not viewed as a monolithic entity, nor are their experiences seen as homogenous as they progress through their HE journey.

Instead, they experience distinct challenges and opportunities that can foster or impede their psychosocial development and aligned attainment. Here, students' HE experience is not exclusively the responsibility of academic faculties. This responsibility is shared across multiple domains, including student services and resources, administrative services, ICT infrastructure, and student supports.

Of particular relevance to this research is the role of the SA and their contribution to holistically fostering student engagement. SAs play a significant role in ensuring that interpersonal engagement remains a central aspect of students' experience by providing pro-active and personalised assistance through monitoring, motivating and mentoring students throughout their HE journey. Central to this discipline is academic advising which provides a dyadic approach to supporting student success.³ Advisory supports are ubiquitous within HEIs; generally, they comprise academic staff who deliver personalised educational assistance in conjunction with their lecturing and research duties. This resource aims to facilitate meaningful student-HEI engagement to enhance academic achievement and support retention (Edwards & Person, 1997; G. Kuh, 2006; Tinto, 2006; Young-Jones, Burt, Dixon, & Hawthorne, 2013). Given that academic advisers are called 'to be accessible, and to be a source of information and encouragement in the advising process' (Crockett, 1985), this role requires an understanding of both institutional issues (e.g. curriculum content and academic policies) and student issues (e.g. psychosocial development) (Coll, 2008; Grites & Gordon, 2000).

Academic advisers help students address issues relating to their specific programme or module; however, students' ability and willingness to engage can be affected by matters beyond this arena. This calls for a support resource that addresses students' holistic needs. Here, the SA models developed within UCD and DCU differentiate themselves through the distinctive role that SAs play for both students and the institution. This resource is a central component of the student support services, particularly around issues related to transition and retention, such as social and academic integration (Fergy et al., 2011; Tinto, 1987). At the local level, they enable students to identify and achieve goals and tackle personal challenges, playing a vital role in the orientation and integration of new students and community-enhancement projects. At the institutional level, they play an essential role in advocating for policy and structural change in response to evolving student needs and preferences.

SAs are embedded within a professional network across their HEI, including careers, counselling, disability, health services, and academic supports; this enables them to provide a universal service across numerous stages of a student lifecycle and facilitate appropriate referrals when necessary. As a result, they are uniquely positioned at the heart of the student-institution interface. In this context, operating on both the individual and community levels, they provide a range of services, including:

- i. Academic: Students may require additional course supports outside of the student-lecturer academic dyad that may be perceived as evaluative. By delivering personalised academic oversight and assistance, SAs can augment students' teaching and learning experience, and empower them to become self-determined learners, e.g. liaising with academic support centres and lectures.

³ UNESCO. (1998) outlines the purpose and functions of academic advising across six areas of assistance: Education plans consistent with life goals; information about academic progression and degree requirements; understanding academic policies and procedures; accessing campus resources; overcoming education and personal problems; and identifying and intervening with conditions that may impede a student's academic achievement.

- ii. Social: Students need to understand and navigate the culture of their HEI and build a sense of belonging (Exter, Korkmaz, & Boling, 2014) if they are to integrate and become constructive members of their cohort. Particularly for incoming first-year students, SAs can foster the process of peer-to-peer integration, such as through involvement in social activities, e.g. support for clubs and societies, and peer mentoring.
- iii. Personal: Students' motivation to participate can be affected by issues within their personal life. SAs can provide pastoral supports through strategies such as intrinsic motivation enhancement, goal creation, and strengths-based advising, all of which can increase engagement, self-regulation, self-efficacy and retention (Locke & Latham, 2002; Soria, Laumer, Morrow, & Marttinen, 2017).
- iv. Financial: Given the broad demographic profile of HE students, they often present with different needs, such as financial issues, that can impede their access to material and experiential resources. SAs can help locate and secure financial supports for students, e.g. nationally-available student-support funds.
- v. Referrals: SAs are embedded within the HEIs, acting as a liaison between different schools and departments. The services a student requires may be beyond the direct scope of SAs' role; at such times, they can refer students to appropriate supports and resources, e.g. health, counselling, chaplaincy, careers services.

Technological Innovations within Higher Education

Digital mediation within HEIs is most evident as a pedagogical resource, supplementing and, presently, substituting for in-person activities. A core example of this is virtual learning environments (VLEs) which facilitate teaching and learning by distributing learning content, communications and assessment (Alves, L, & Morais, 2017). VLEs can also be an essential resource for students who may otherwise struggle in a solely face-to-face instruction environment. In addition, learning analytics are a vehicle through which potential disengagement issues are mitigated and retention is enhanced (Cooper, Ferguson, & Wolff, 2016; Nik Nurul Hafzan, Safaai, Asiah, Mohd Saberi, & Siti Syuhaida, 2019). Hlosta, Zdráhal, and Zendulka (2017) note the high dimensionality of learner data, with engagement models and records constructed from digitally-sourced metrics such as VLE access and usage, library access, grades, fee compliance, and physical attendance.

The increasing degree to which technology is embedded in the student experience is apparent in the UCD INDEX Survey (2019) which found that 84% of respondents use smartphones to support their learning and 95% use digital resources to find information online. Alongside this, the ubiquity of social media, i.e. 'web-based and mobile applications that allow individuals and organisations to create, engage, and share new user-generated or existing content, in digital environments through multi-way communication' (Davis, Deil-Amen, Rios-Aguilar, & Canché, 2012), also enables community-driven, peer-to-peer connections among students.

Appropriately used, digital resources and strategies can be instrumental from an intervention standpoint, with Gardner and Brooks (2018) noting that early access to course resources provides accurate predictions of success or failure within two weeks of student commencement. Nevertheless, despite their numerous contributions, engagement metrics should be collected, analysed and actioned with caution. As Brooks, Thompson, and Teasley (2015) highlight, there is also a risk of harm when digital resources are not used to reflect students' participation either accurately or appropriately. These concerns are echoed by Wolff, Zdrahal, Nikolov, and Pantucek (2013), arguing that 'there is a need to take into account the interplay between how a

module is structured and how the VLE is intended to be used within that structure'.⁴ Therefore, having a clear understanding of what is being captured and measured by learner analytics and ensuring engagement thresholds are well-defined is necessary to gain meaningful, predictive and actionable insights (Gašević, Dawson, Rogers, & Gasevic, 2016).

Importantly, technological innovations are also broadening how HEIs foster, capture and analyse student engagement across a range of domains, including within advisory fields. Here, the reciprocal functioning of digital and interpersonal engagement is also evident within HEI Student Advisory services which utilise both approaches to anticipate, identify, and respond to students' needs. Therefore, beyond reducing potential barriers to learning, technological innovation provides HEIs with additional support avenues and capabilities (Morra & Reynolds, 2010), including increased flexibility and adaptability in connecting with students across different platforms. For SAs, digital mediation was, in fact, already a service feature (White, 2020), e.g. one-to-one video meetings, online resources and repositories, social media, messaging services (e.g. live chat functions), and email. This digital integration was primarily due to the diverse nature of the student population and their experience, encompassing Erasmus students, students with caring responsibilities, students on placements, and students who are doing online degrees.

As SAs accelerate their adoption of technological supports, it is clear that student support services have the capacity to expand to deliver a broader spectrum of resources and initiatives. Notwithstanding, it is always a concern as to whether or not students will choose to access support services; Simpson (2018) notes that 'one cannot assume that online students will request help or proactively seek advising assistance'. This could be an issue for SAs working with, in particular, current first-year students (incoming Autumn 2020) who may not yet have experienced the traditional, in-person model. It also poses an additional, potential challenge for SAs in promoting their services. SAs will need to commit to ensuring that the same type of quality advising methods continue to exist online as existed pre-pandemic.

Research Design

The theoretical model underpinning this research is psychosocial developmental theory and engagement theory. The research sites were Dublin City University and University College Dublin. Participants are drawn from a purposive sample of SAs currently working within these HEIs (UCD: n=10; DCU: n=4). They are homogenous concerning their profession, with latent heterogeneity apparent regarding issues such as professional experience, student cohorts, and professional interests. A mixed-methodology was employed to reveal and critically examine participants' professional experiences and attitudes towards the investigation issues. This comprised a mixed-methods questionnaire, consisting primarily of open-ended, structured, qualitative questions, administered online via Google Forms. It addressed the broad issues of student engagement, supports delivery and the student experience. A reflexive thematic analysis, rooted in interpretive phenomenological philosophy, was adopted to analyse and interpret the results. This approach frames the researchers' subjectivity as an analytic and interpretive "resource" (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2018). Ethical approval was granted by the UCD Office of Research Ethics and the DCU Research Ethics Committee.

⁴ It is also worth considering the issue raised by Gardner and Brooks (2018) that a substantial proportion of digital engagement literature to date has been informed by MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) as opposed to engagement data augmenting physical classroom environments, which raises concerns regarding its universal applicability.

Results: Questionnaire

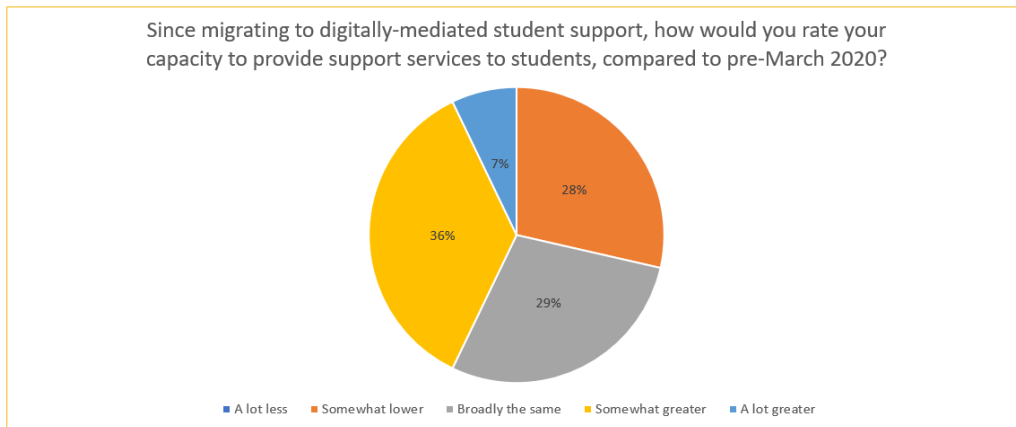


Figure 2. Questionnaire Results: Providing Supports

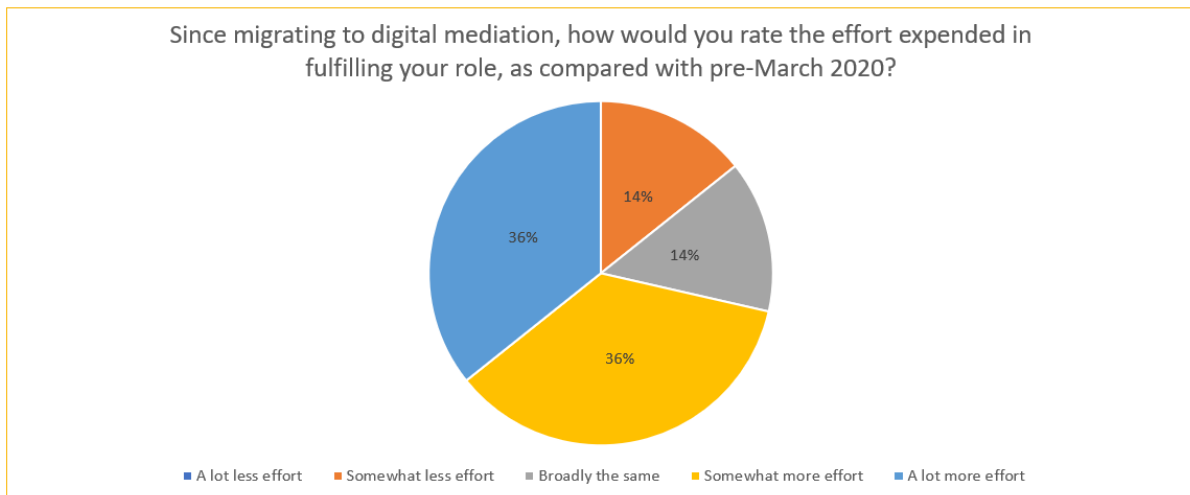


Figure 3. Questionnaire Results: Effort Expended

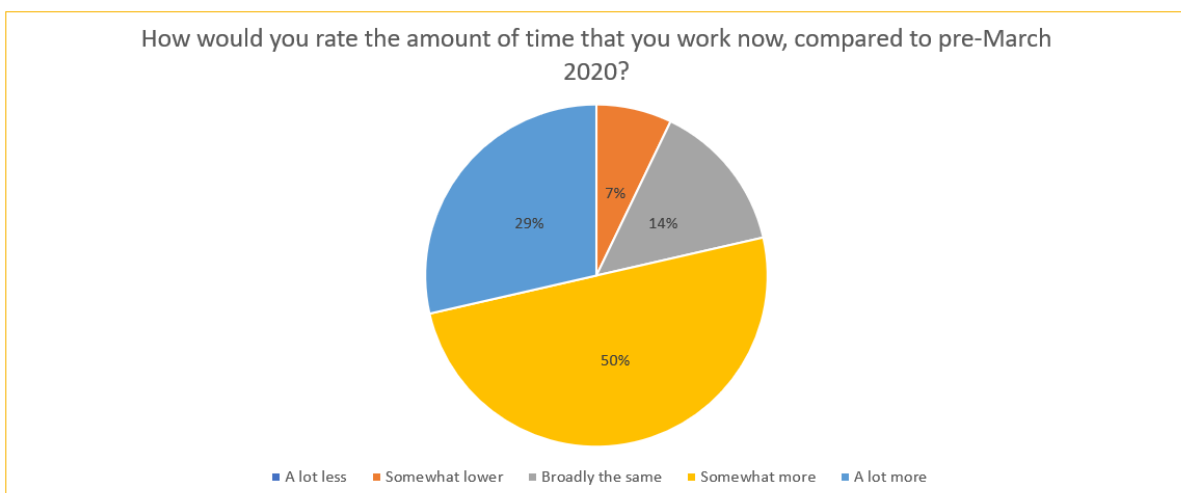


Figure 4. Questionnaire Results: Time Worked

Results: Thematic Analysis⁵

Theme I: Motivational Impairment

Students' motivation to engage has been affected by lack of access to in-person activities and interactions, both academic and social.

Students' capacity to constructively engage with their HEI is underpinned by their level of motivation. Motivation is a psychological state characterised by the arousal and adoption of goal-directed behaviours (Valle, Nunez, Cabanach, & González-Pienda, 2009). In the context of our current discussion, Brophy (1988) defines motivation as 'a student tendency to find academic activities meaningful and worthwhile and to try to derive the intended academic benefits from them'. Here, Janke (2020) notes that intrinsically-motivated students with a learning-goal orientation had higher levels of satisfaction and were less likely to drop out than extrinsically-motivated students with a performance-goal orientation. Therefore, students' motivation is pivotal to attainment – a complex and relational phenomenon that SAs should approach as existing within and influenced by the resources and constraints they navigate daily.

While digital tools and VLEs have enabled continuity of services and supports, students' holistic engagement has been undermined during the COVID-19 pandemic as they have missed out on in-person relationships (both formal and informal) within social and academic settings; in-person academic activities can offer structure and direction, and social activities can offer connection and belonging.

"The move to online learning has removed the physical interaction between the student and their learning environment, which is a core motivating factor when it comes to academic success" (PG-UCD).

"Students are less motivated, missing out on the social aspect of UCD and connecting with their peers" (PF-UCD).

Theme II: Multi-dimensional Engagement

Student engagement is multi-dimensional, arising from various experiences; digital mediation has impeded SAs' options in seeking to foster multi-dimensional engagement.

Student engagement encompasses a variety of experiences and capacities. Fostering engagement goes right to the heart of student advisory services – collaborating with students on identifying engagement impediments and enhancers, and tailoring supports accordingly, e.g. through information, referrals and student-led activities. Forms of student engagement include:

"Interactions with peers/faculty/staff face to face; online; by phone" (PA-UCD).

"Utilisation of student supports and services to develop personally, professionally or academically" (PB-DCU).

⁵ P=Participant, followed by alphabetically categorised participant and their respective HEI.

The multi-dimensional nature of engagement is reflected in the broad range of roles and responsibilities that SAs occupy – extending across academic, administrative and pastoral domains. Here, they note tasks such as:

“Work with students who are facing obstacles on their academic journey that may hinder their engagement, success or performance at university” (PB-DCU).

“Providing a relationship space for the student to reflect upon and identify their issues and assist and empower the student to address those needs” (PH-UCD).

Given the range of student issues and concerns they engage with, it is important that SAs are embedded within their HEI and can, in turn, draw on a variety of resources when providing supports. SAs have been able to maintain service provisions in the form of, for example, connecting with students one-to-one via video calls and addressing queries through online forums. Nevertheless, heightened reliance on digital mediation and the lack of in-person campus attendance have impeded SAs’ options in offering student support and resources, particularly community-based transition and integration initiatives, and academic resources.

Theme III: Ongoing Functionality of Student Supports

Digital mediation has shaped student-support communications; however, it has not undermined its functionality.

While heightened reliance on digital tools has shaped how SAs and students engage, this shift has not undermined SAs’ capacity to make tangible contributions to students’ welfare. Digital mediation has presented both opportunities and challenges for SAs; it has made demands regarding their technological proficiencies and interpersonal skills. Opportunities have included increased accessibility and flexibility in service provision, bolstered by students’ latent receptivity towards the usage of technology, given that they “...are more innovative in this space than staff as they are digital natives” (PB-UCD).

“It allows students access some services 24/7 so they use information when they need it and not when we are available” (PB-DCU).

“I am more flexible to meet students online after regular working hours” (PA-DCU).

Nevertheless, there have been challenges in fostering interactivity, wherein it is more difficult to establish an organic, fluid dialogue that is responsive to emotional needs arising in the moment:

“Sometimes the tech is a bit clunky and a moment is lost and the fluidity of conversation is impacted comparatively to other arenas” (PD-UCD).

“I may lose some of the advantages that physical meetings can bring in terms of verbal/non-verbal communication” (PG-UCD).

This stance supports the importance of the interpersonal underpinnings to student-adviser relationships. Vianden (2016) noted that positive adviser-student interactions influenced students’ overall satisfaction. Building on this, it is vital that the resources are in place, e.g.

infrastructure and education, to ensure that SAs can effectively integrate technology into service and resource delivery.

Theme IV: Blended Interpersonal Supports

SAs possess the ability and willingness to provide “blended” supports, utilising in-person and digitally-mediated communications.

The concept of “interpersonal” support has evolved to encompass both in-person and digitally-mediated interactions. While these have been seen as being in a binary relationship, notwithstanding their qualitative distinctiveness, they are increasingly experienced as existing on a continuum of student-staff HEI interactions i.e. they both facilitate and foster student engagement albeit in different ways and to different extents. While digital mediation is vital, it is perceived as having a more limited capacity to foster holistic student engagement, for example, socially and emotionally; in-person engagement is perceived as remaining central to students’ psychosocial and academic development.

“Many tasks can be completed competently at a distance but some face to face contact is desired by both students staff and important for student engagement” (PE-UCD).

“At the moment the technology we have is robust, however does not replace the advantages to a face to face meeting” (PB-DCU).

“Blended” approaches have traditionally been taken within a pedagogical context; here, the question is, can a similar integration of digital and in-person communication approaches be applied within advisory relationships? In this regard, SAs possess the ability and willingness to continue integrating technology into service provision following the recommencement of in-person activities. However, this requires ongoing efforts to ensure knowledge and competency in the area of digital tools and techniques.

“[A] blended approach will give more flexibility in the future for students...There is no point a student rushing to meet an adviser, if they can have the meeting online” (PB-UCD).

Thematic Analysis V: Ongoing Institutional Assistance

Students’ ability to successfully reintegrate into in-person engagement requires the provision of institutional supports.

As students embark on the process of commencing, or recommencing, in-person engagement, they require ongoing institutional assistance to ensure this process is as effective and seamless as possible. For both staff and students, the transition to digital engagement strategies was made more manageable through the provision of appropriate tools and resources. Likewise, actions will need to be taken to ensure that this process is as efficient as possible across three areas:

- i. Communication: Ensuring that there is a clear, transparent and timely dialogue between HEIs and internal stakeholders (both staff and students) concerning the decisions on how to navigate the reopening of campuses successfully and how to optimise digital mediation strategies – “ongoing regular communication and opportunities for students to provide feedback about the aspects of online learning” (PJ-UCD).

- ii. Community: Ensuring students feel that sense of interpersonal connection by providing resources and supports to engage in formal/informal and educational/social activities – “Connection is what the students are missing currently and efforts need to be made to create connection within the classroom or outside activity or informal online gatherings” (PB-DCU).
- iii. Connectivity: Ensuring that, given the increased reliance on digital communication, the functionality of digital resources is augmented – “More could be offered to students in terms of technology support – laptop rental, increased financial support” (PA-DCU).

Recommendations

Building on these findings, we have formulated a set of recommendations that can be adopted by HEIs seeking to ensure the effective continuation of in-person attendance:

- i. Student Supports: We recommend providing campus orientation/reorientation resources, e.g. information sessions, group activities. In addition, the ongoing provision of blended support services, both pedagogical and pastoral, will be important to meet students’ needs for continued digital communication. Alongside this, as HEIs continue to utilise digital resources, it is important that SAs are attentive to students’ off-site needs, such as technology access, and have the resources to cater to these needs should they arise.
- ii. Student Adviser Supports: There should be greater scope for blended supports and the provision of resources to achieve this. To enable this, there should also be education on evolving technological tools, e.g. workshops/seminars/best-practice sharing, and enhancement of SAs’ insights into at-risk students with data analytics, e.g. VLE/attendance engagement.
- iii. Institutional Initiatives: Within a broader institutional context, specific initiatives can help ensure SAs can constructively integrate technology into the provision of student supports. Here, standardised and consolidated online student platforms, e.g. inter-module connectivity, can create a more seamless engagement experience. In addition, the criteria for at-risk student flags, drawing on a dynamic range of engagement information, should be examined. Finally, as students continue to engage with HEI activity from their homes through “blended” learning, it is important to re-appraise the extent to which student supports encompass student life beyond campus.

Conclusion

Despite its rapidity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the transition to digital mediation has successfully helped SAs to continue to support students. Factors that have positively influenced this include institutional supports, e.g. information workshops; pre-existing digital architecture and resources; SAs’ adaptability; and students’ receptivity. The question of how changes to the delivery of student services and supports via digital tools shape the design and delivery of student supports moving forward is important to consider at this juncture. While interpersonal support can encompass both in-person and digitally-mediated interactions, the ongoing centrality of in-person engagement remains apparent – both pedagogically and pastorally. Nevertheless, the appropriate usage of technology allows for increased HEI student support capability, which is most effective when combined with face-to-face support as part of a blended approach. Consequently, there is a role for digital mediation and the provision of “blended” supports. For HEIs to make the fullest use of their resources and meaningfully contribute to students’ engagement and success, and the overall student experience, they should consider extending their approach to fostering engagement beyond the traditional pedagogical teacher-learner dyad. By embracing a comprehensive range of opportunities for student engagement via digitally-mediated supports, HEIs can continue to enhance in-person service

provision and students' psychosocial development across a range of dimensions (Bowden et al., 2019).

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