HEA | An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas
The Higher Education Authority

Between Metrics:

Rethinking 21st Century Student Success in Ireland

Discussion Paper

Rebecca Roper
Teaching and Learning Policy Advisor, Student Success, Higher Education Authority (HEA)

Between Metrics:
Rethinking 21st Century Student Success in Ireland

Discussion Paper

Prepared by Rebecca Roper**,**
Teaching and Learning Policy Advisor (Student Success),
Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2026

Version 1.0, January 2026

DOI: 10.82110/fg29-sd88

Higher Education Authority, Dublin

How to cite:
Roper, R. (2025). *Between Metrics: Rethinking 21st Century Student Success in Ireland*. Higher Education Authority. DOI: 10.82110/fg29-sd88

Contents

1. Introduction

Student success has emerged as a central priority in higher education policy and practice, both internationally and within Ireland. While once narrowly equated with retention rates or progression to graduation, success is now increasingly understood in holistic terms that encompass not only academic achievement but also personal growth, wellbeing, and the capacity to thrive during and beyond higher education (Kuh, 2008; Tinto, 2012).

In the Irish context, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2019) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2025)1 have both framed student success as a multidimensional construct, embedding widening participation, equity of outcomes, and a commitment to fostering environments where all students can flourish. This shift reflects wider international debates about the role of higher education in promoting belonging, mattering, and agency, alongside academic and professional outcomes (Thomas, 2012; Strayhorn, 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the fragility of student success, revealing the extent to which it is contingent on conditions of support, inclusion, and wellbeing. Across Europe, the United States, and Australia, studies highlighted how disruptions to teaching and social life amplified isolation, stress, and inequality (Bersia et al., 2024; Pérez-Jorge, 2025). Many students in Ireland experience these experiences, reporting mental health challenges, financial stress, and barriers to accessing services (Mothersill, Nguyen, Loughnane, & Hargreaves, 2024; Oti, Foley, & Pitt, 2025).

The following discussion draws together international research, Irish policy, and—crucially—the perspectives of students in Ireland through national focus groups conducted in 2025. It asks:
- What is the purpose of student success and why is it important?
- How is success defined across different higher education contexts, particularly by students in Ireland?
-What are the current and legacy challenges shaping success?
- What do students identify as the enablers and barriers of success?
- How can Irish higher education move towards implementation of a shared, holistic understanding of success?

This discussion paper brings together research, policy, the National Forum Framework for Student Success (2021), the Framework Review (2025) and the views of current students. It illustrates that student success is not a fixed outcome. It is relational, participatory, and an integral part of the whole HE system.

[1] In 2022 the National Forum was established on a sustainable basis under the auspices of the HEA.

2. What is the Purpose of Student Success and Why is it Important?

The purpose of student success in higher education extends beyond conventional metrics such as completion or employment outcomes. At its core, student success is about enabling students to achieve their academic, personal, and professional potential while cultivating belonging, wellbeing, and agency (Kuh, 2008). Key aspects of the purpose and importance of students' success in higher education are outlined in the following sub-sections.

2.1 Educational purpose

From an educational standpoint, success encompasses the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge and transferable skills that enable graduates to contribute meaningfully to society. The Australian "transition pedagogy" model highlights that student success requires structured scaffolding across the first year, embedding academic literacies, peer engagement, and a sense of belonging (Kift, 2009). Similarly, research on high-impact practices (Kuh, 2008) emphasises learning activities such as undergraduate research, service learning, and collaborative projects that deepen engagement and retention.

2.2 Holistic development

Success is more than cognitive achievement. It includes personal growth, identity formation, and wellbeing. In Ireland, national policies emphasise equity of access and outcomes, recognising that success should not be determined by socio-economic background, gender, disability, or other structural factors (HEA, 2023). This aligns with broader European discourses on student-centred learning (European Students' Union, 2024), which notes empowerment, participation, and inclusivity as conditions of success.

2.3 Belonging and mattering

Thomas (2012) found that belonging is the strongest predictor of retention in UK higher education, while Strayhorn (2018) identifies belonging as a "fundamental human need" that drives persistence. Felten & Lambert (2021) identify small acts of care to create Relationship Rich Education (RRE) and identify "webs" of meaningful relationships as key to students' sense of belonging. Gravett (2024) and others focus on relational pedagogies, with connection and mattering fore fronted in teaching and assessment.

2.4 Agency and partnership

Another dimension of purpose is the recognition of students as active agents. Bandura (2006) recognises the importance of this and allocates four dimensions: Intentionality (action plans), Forethought (goal setting through time), Self-regulation and Self-reflectiveness. Bovill (2020) and Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten (2014) emphasise the transformative potential of student–staff partnerships, where students co-create curricula, assessment, and policy. Such partnerships not only enhance learning but also foster agency and ownership, contributing to authentic forms of personal success.

In Ireland, the work of the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) on student–staff partnership is especially important in this area. NStEP was launched in 2016 as a joint initiative of Quality and Qualifications Ireland, the Higher Education Authority and Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn. That same year, 'Embedding the Principles of Student Engagement' set out 10 proactive principles, including 'Student as Partner', and 'Students as Co-Creators'. This was followed in 2020 by 'Steps to Partnership The Path to a New National Approach to Student Engagement in Decision-Making' (2020), a document which underpins the 2021 Principles of Student Engagement.

2.5 Wellbeing as a foundation

Finally, wellbeing is recognised as vital to student success (Douwes, 2023). Post-COVID-19, research indicates that academic anxiety, loneliness, and stress are critical barriers (Dost, 2025). In Ireland, the Healthy Campus Framework and inter-institutional wellbeing initiatives (Bickerdike et al., 2024) highlight

the centrality of mental health to success. The Healthy Campus Framework advocates a whole campus approach to wellness: 'A Healthy Campus adopts a holistic understanding of health, takes a whole campus approach and aspires to create a learning environment and organisational culture that enhances the health and wellbeing of its community and enables people to achieve their full potential.' (HEA, 2022). My World-2 (Dooley, et al. 2019) findings indicate 'college, future and finances' as the top stressors for young adults 18 – 25 years old, with significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety than those reported in My World- 1 (2012).

Taken together, the purpose of student success is nuanced, complex and multidimensional. It includes disciplinary mastery, personal growth and responsibility, employability, agency, belonging, and wellbeing. Success is thus simultaneously student-defined, institution-enabled, and outcomes-oriented (HEA, 2025)—a formulation that reflects broader policy, institutional practice and student voice.

3. A Shared Understanding of Student Success in Higher Education Globally

Although student success is increasingly prioritised, there is no single definition across systems. Instead, understandings vary by cultural, historical, and policy context. The following are examples from the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, Europe and international policy illustrate some of the dominant framings currently shaping discussion and practice.

3.1 United Kingdom (UK)

In the UK, the "What Works?" programme (Thomas, 2012) highlighted engagement and belonging as critical conditions for retention, leading to institutional efforts to build community and enhance teaching practices. Current discourse emphasises student partnership and inclusivity, resonating with relational pedagogy (Bovill, 2020). In Scotland, the Student Experience Model (SPARQS, 2023) centralises the belief that working in partnership with students, understanding their experience of learning, and working with them in enhancement activity is key to providing a high-quality learning experience for all. In the UK, Advance HE, a charity and professional membership body that promotes excellence in higher education, has published a Student Success Framework focuses on six outcomes. These include changes to assessment, partnership with students and employability (Advance HE, 2019).

3.2 United States (US)

In the US, definitions have often centred on access, retention, and graduation. Tinto (2012) argued that institutional action should be rethought to support persistence, emphasising integration into academic and social systems. Strayhorn (2018) expanded this by foregrounding belonging as a key predictor of success. Works by Alison Cook-Sather and others demonstrate the power of partnership in fostering mattering and agency in students. Felten and Lambert (2020) emphasise the importance of connections

– relationship rich, meaningful networks – in college settings for success and persistence. Overall, the US approach is typically 'bottom up', emerging from the work of academics, practitioners, and individual HEIs, rather than being coordinated through a single national strategy. This fosters innovation and responsiveness to local contexts, but in the absence of a national strategy it can also produce fragmentation across the sector.

3.3 Australia

Australia has led work on transition pedagogy, framing student success as an integrated experience across curricula, assessment, and support systems (Kift, 2009). The emphasis is on designing institutional environments that scaffold success from the outset, particularly for first-year students. More recently, national strategies such as the Australian Universities Accord (2024) and the Australian Strategy for International Education provide sector-wide direction. This national framing helps ensure coherence and alignment across institutions, though it can also risk constraining local innovation in favour of standardisation.

3.4 Ireland

In Ireland, the National Forum (2019) articulated a shared understanding of student success as a shared responsibility, evolving into the formulation that success is simultaneously student-defined, institution-created, and outcomes-oriented (HEA, 2025). The Review of the Student Success Framework (HEA, 2025) extends this by emphasising equity, accessibility, principles of student engagement (HEA, 2016), and student voice in shaping success across the sector. While much of the early thinking and practice around student success was developed bottom-up through the work of academics and practitioners, Ireland has also taken a national policy approach to embedding student success, coordinated through the HEA and National Forum. This combination of practitioner-led innovation and system-level policy alignment differentiates Ireland from many other jurisdictions.

3.5 Europe

At the European level, the European Students' Union (2024) promotes student-centred learning as a key

enabler, highlighting the importance of agency, inclusivity, and adaptability. The European University Association (EUA) emphasizes the centrality of Teaching and Learning as 'a core mission and responsibility of universities' to ensure student learning and success (EUA, 2018). The recent European Higher Education Area in 2024: Bologna Process Implementation Report focuses on completion equality, inclusive policies and tools for monitoring progress, which demonstrates that student success – particularly for under-represented groups – is a core concern mediating much of social dimension efforts in higher education.

3.6 International

At the global level, organisations such as UNESCO and the International Association of Universities (IAU) emphasise a rights-based approach to higher education, framing success in terms of equitable access, meaningful participation, wellbeing, and lifelong learning (UNESCO, 1998; 2015; IAU, 2008). The Education 2030 Framework for Action and Sustainable Development Goal 4 situates student success within broader commitments to inclusion and quality in education worldwide. These initiatives provide a strong normative foundation and a shared global language for student success. However, as high-level frameworks, they rely on national and institutional uptake for implementation, and the diversity of local contexts means that aspirations can remain unevenly realised in practice.

3.7 Across contexts

Despite differences in emphasis between the US, Australia, the UK, Europe, and international framings, a shared understanding of student success has emerged:

Success is not limited to outputs (e.g., graduation, progression, grades), but also encompasses belonging, wellbeing, and agency.

Institutions have a responsibility to create environments in which students can thrive.

Student success is a shared responsibility between the HEI, staff and crucially, the student.

Students must be recognised as partners in defining and achieving success.

This convergence suggests that while definitions vary, there is broad agreement that success is relational, participatory, and systemic. The Irish framework's tripartite definition—*student-defined,*

institutionally-enabled, and outcomes-oriented (HEA, 2025)—offers a strong basis for alignment, even as evolving contexts continue to reshape what student success means in practice.

4. Legacy and Current Issues in Student Success – Changing Context

Student success in Irish higher education cannot be understood without acknowledging the historical and structural legacies that continue to shape the student experience, nor without attending to the pressing issues that currently dominate policy and practice. These legacies include the growth and market focus of higher education, varied progress on widening participation initiatives at HEI level, and teaching traditions that often rely on one-way didactic delivery instead of inclusive, student-centred approaches. Current external issues for students include rising financial precarity due to inflation, accommodation shortages, mental health challenges, uncertainty about the future, and the lingering impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unique to some higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland are the recent mergers across Institutes of Technology into larger Technological Universities through the Technological Universities Act of 2018 (Technological Universities Act 2018). Taken together, these dynamics create both opportunities and challenges for realising a holistic and equitable vision of student success.

4.1 Structural Legacies: Marketisation, Massification and Mergers

Research indicates that, over the last three decades, higher education across Europe and beyond has been reshaped by processes of marketisation and massification. In the UK, Molesworth, Scullion, and Nixon (2010) critiqued the increasing construct of students as consumers, with implications for how success is defined and measured. While market logics have created pressures in the Irish system, Ireland has also pursued a strong social mission of widening participation (HEA, 2023).

The expansion of higher education participation is a success story in its own right: Ireland invests considerably in higher education with over 60% of school leavers progressing to higher education (DES, 2025) with significant increases among first-generation and underrepresented groups. Yet expansion has also introduced pressures of scale, raising questions about whether institutions have adapted

sufficiently to support diverse student populations. Students from non-traditional backgrounds may find themselves in environments designed around a narrow conception of the 'traditional' student, which can hinder belonging and mattering (Thomas, 2012). Additionally, social and geographic configuration of Ireland's higher education system may limit choice for some students (McTaggart, 2024).

4.2 Widening Participation and Equity of Outcomes

Irish higher education has made important strides in access, with targeted supports for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, students with disabilities, and members of the Traveller and Roma communities. However, there is growing recognition that access is not enough; equity of outcomes must also be prioritised. The fourth National Access Plan (2022–2028) emphasises that retention, progression, and success must be monitored for priority group students. According to HEA analyses[2], there is variation by socioeconomic background in the progression rates of new entrants from first to second year of higher education as well as degree completion rates, with students from disadvantaged areas being less likely to progress and complete their studies when compared to students from non-disadvantaged areas.

The launch of the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) in 2017 with its initial three Strands, focusing on broadening access to teacher education (PATH 1), the 1916 Bursary Fund (PATH 2) and building partnerships between HEIs and community partners (PATH 3), has demonstrated short-term impact and laid the foundation for improving equity of access to higher education. From September 2025, a new sustainable multi-annual funding model is taking effect for PATH 1 and PATH 3 which allows HEIs to build on the learnings of the pilot phases in supporting the goals of the National Access Plan and facilitates longer-term planning to support under-represented groups in accessing, participating and succeeding in higher education.

A fourth strand of PATH launched in 2022 which further supports inclusive universally designed environments for all students and developed provision for students with intellectual disabilities (PATH 4). Furthermore, in 2022, PATH 5 – focusing on increasing the participation of Traveller and Roma students in higher education – was launched as a three-year pilot.

[2] For more information on progression rates, please see: HEA – Non-progression by Student Characteristics – 1 | Statistics | Higher Education Authority. For more information on completion rates, please see: Completion Data Release March 2021 | Statistics | Higher Education Authority.

A focus on outcomes is vital. As the report of the HEA Expert Group recommends, success must be simultaneously student-defined, institution-enabled, and outcomes-oriented. Without equitable outcomes, access risks becoming symbolic rather than substantive. Students from priority groups frequently report feeling marginalised or unsupported, a reality borne out in both Irish and international research (HEA, 2023; Strayhorn, 2018).

4.3 Teaching Legacies

In recent years, Irish higher education has made progress towards student-centred learning. Since 2014, this was supported by the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund and, since 2019, the Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (SATLE). But teaching legacies remain. In the focus groups below (section 5), students still report prescriptive teaching practices, an over-reliance on lectures and PowerPoint (or similar) presentations, and few opportunities for dialogue and co-creation.

This reflects a tension between traditional academic cultures and newer pedagogical models that emphasise active, inclusive, and partnership-based approaches. Bovill (2020) and Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten (2014) argue that student–staff partnerships can help shift these cultures by positioning students as co-creators rather than passive recipients. While such practices are gaining traction, particularly through the upcoming National Recognition Framework, they are currently pocketed and unevenly embedded across the sector.

4.4 Financial Precarity, Commuting and Accommodation

Among the current barriers to success, students report challenges regarding financial and housing pressures. Rising tuition-related costs, difficulties finding and holding on to suitable, affordable accommodation and long commutes were also highlighted as pressure points. The Eurostudent VIII report (HEA, 2023) found that 40% of students in Ireland surveyed experience financial difficulties, with one in three students in paid employment during term time. NStEP's recent Census (2024) of 254 student representatives from 17 HEIs, identifies 38% of respondents being in either full or part-time employment while in college, with 1.97% without a permanent residence. Student accommodation and financial challenges influence attendance, engagement, and wellbeing. Commuting is also a source of frustration to many students. Public transport can be expensive, unreliable and causes stress.

Commuting is time consuming and impacts social engagement and study time. Cullinan & Flannery (2023) suggest a number of supports Irish HEIs can put in place, including 'adjustments to timetables to include later starts, or blocked timetables to help reduce the number and/or timing of days that commuter students need to be on campus'.

These financial barriers disproportionately affect priority groups, exacerbating inequalities in outcomes for students (McCoy & Byrne, 2011; Iannelli et al, 2024). They also intersect with wellbeing: financial stress is strongly linked to mental health difficulties and lower academic performance (Oti, Foley, & Pitt, 2025). Research in Norway by Boe (2021) demonstrates a clear relationship between financial struggle, failed exams and mental health in HE students.

4.5 Mental Health and Wellbeing

Student wellbeing has emerged as a defining issue of the current era. The WHO defines wellbeing as "a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions" (WHO, 2021). Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, surveys showed rising levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among students in Ireland (MacNeela & Burke, 2010). The pandemic significantly exacerbated these trends. Mothersill, Nguyen, Loughnane, and Hargreaves (2024) found elevated rates of depression and probable diagnoses of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among students in Ireland linked to disrupted routines and social isolation. According to the Lancet Psychiatry Commission on Youth Mental Health, 'Societal changes over the last two decades have harmed the mental health of young people and increased mental ill health among them.' (McGorry, Patrick et al. 2024). This aligns with the findings of the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework Review (HEA, 2025), which identifies additional needs in the sector. The review recommends stronger systemic links between HEIs the Health Service Executive (HSE), equal access to services for all students, particularly in multi-campus HEIs, and broader service provision, including awareness raising initiatives, staff training, additional interventions for students, particularly those at-risk.

International evidence confirms that wellbeing is now integral to student success. Dost (2025) highlights that loneliness, academic anxiety, and COVID-related stress have a negative impact on wellbeing and lead to reduced academic engagement. The Healthy Campus Framework and the Inter-Institutional Healthy Campus Report (Bickerdike et al., 2024) emphasise the need for systemic, institution-wide approaches to student health, including preventative measures and accessible support services.

4.6 Digital Transformation and Post-Pandemic Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the digital transformation of higher education. This has created both opportunities and challenges for student success. Remote learning highlighted issues of digital inequality, with some students lacking adequate devices, broadband, or home study spaces. At the same time, blended and flexible models demonstrated potential benefits for accessibility, particularly for students balancing work, caring responsibilities, or disabilities.

Institutions in Ireland are now grappling with how to embed these lessons in a sustainable way. The challenge is to design hybrid pedagogies that preserve belonging and community while leveraging the benefits of digital tools. This is not an easy task.

4.7 Global and Future Challenges

Finally, current and emerging global challenges also shape student success. The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and changing labour markets raise questions about the future needs and landscape of graduate employability.

Climate change, geopolitical instability, and demographic shifts also create uncertainty for higher education systems. Institutions must therefore prepare students not only with disciplinary knowledge but also with resilience, adaptability, and transferable skills that help them succeed in changing contexts.

4.8 Towards Student Voice

The interplay of legacy and current issues reveals that student success is complex and debated. Structural inequities, resource constraints, and cultural legacies remain deeply embedded, while new pressures create additional layers of challenge. But these challenges also bring opportunities to reimagine higher education around student voice, agency, and belonging.

Success must be defined with, not for, students (National Forum, 2019). There has been a global shift in higher education away from pedagogies that rely on lecturer-driven, lecture-based content and towards interactive and more democratic discussion-based pedagogies including student led-learning, student-staff partnerships, problem-based learning with equal participation. In this context, the HEA conducted

student focus groups in 2025 to provide insight into how success is defined and experienced by students in Irish higher education.

5. Student Perspectives on Success – Focus Group Insights

5.1 Methodology Overview: Student Success Focus Groups

The student focus groups were conducted online between February and May 2025 and involved 93 participants from HEIs across the Republic of Ireland (16 public and 2 private). Students were represented across four geographic regions: Leinster, Munster, Connaught, and Ulster - reflecting the diversity of institutional types and student experiences in the Irish higher education sector.

While research and policy frameworks emphasise belonging, mattering, agency, and outcomes, the voices of students themselves demonstrate how these concepts play out in daily life. Their perspectives illustrate a holistic understanding of success and highlight both the enablers and barriers within the Irish higher education system.

Each focus group was held online and lasted between one hour and an hour and a half. Group sizes ranged from two to nine students. This allowed for informal but in-depth discussion and a diversity of perspectives.

Profile of Participants – Student Success Focus Groups

Geography:

42 students studying in Leinster
27 students studying in Connaught
23 student studying in Munster
2 students studying in Donegal/Ulster

Number of students:

15 Postgraduate students

5 Mature students

18 International students, of which 5 from the EU

78 undergraduates [including mature and international (non-EU and EU) students]

Total: 93 students

Focus Group questions

The focus groups were guided by a semi-structured set of questions, designed to prompt personal reflections and wider perspectives on student success:

What is your definition of student success in college?

What are the indicators of success?

Can you share a story of a moment of success in college?

What are the enablers of success for you on: (a) an institutional level, and (b) a pedagogic (in the classroom) level?

What are the barriers to your success?

What recommendations for success would you give to your institutions?

What are your future concerns around success?

This structure ensured that the discussions explored both individual lived experiences and systemic enablers and barriers, while also prompting students to imagine future challenges and opportunities.

The data was analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's approach (2022). This gave a systematic but flexible way to identify patterns of meaning across the dataset while staying close to students' own words. Themes were developed inductively from the data.

Direct quotations from students are included in the findings to illustrate themes. Quotes have been anonymised but retain contextual details such as region, student type (undergraduate, postgraduate, mature, international) and focus group number, to reflect the diversity of voices.

5.2 Approach and Experiential Insights

This methodology reflects the central concern of the paper: that student success is best understood as student-defined, institution-enabled, and outcomes-focussed. By centring the voices of students, the findings give a lived dimension to policy and research frameworks, showing the conditions that enable success, the barriers that remain, and the aspirations students hold for their futures. The following contains quotations around the questions asked, focused on themes of definitions, indicators, enablers of success institutionally and pedagogically, barriers to success, recommendations and future concerns.

Definitions of Success

Students consistently defined success in broad, holistic terms, encompassing not only academic achievement but also wellbeing, balance, and personal growth.

- “Being able to balance academics, personal life, and work commitments without burning out” (FG11, Munster).
- “Continuously improving from year to year, from project to project.” (FG1, EU Leinster).
- “Being in college in itself is success to me.” (FG19, Connaught).

“I think of student success as a Venn diagram, with success in life being built from success in college. It's acquiring a number of key skills, networking, interacting, communicating, expression of emotions, critical thinking and others. These skills are the foundation for success in life and can be acquired not only through academia, but also through work experience, social growth and personal development.” (FG27, Leinster).

For many, success was framed as self-defined rather than institutionally imposed. Students articulated that while grades and qualifications mattered, success also meant developing confidence, resilience, mattering and a sense of identity:

- “Academics was always my measure, but now I think it's more the giving back and helping other people.” (FG21, Leinster).
- “Having confidence in myself to move into the future – that’s real success” (FG7, International, Munster).
- “ ... there's such big classes, it's actually up to you as a student to go up to that lecturer and introduce yourself. That first lecture just to, a nd to keep introducing yourself. You know every single day after class you can go up to them and make sure that you are known. You know, if you're not known, that's up to you.” (FG21, Leinster)

Indicators of success

Indicators of success included a mix of academic markers (grades, progression, completing the degree) and non-academic dimensions such as social integration, wellbeing, and employability.

- “It’s not just the grades; it’s how confident you feel, knowing the material” (FG7, International, Postgraduate, Leinster).
- “Being able to develop a counter argument to feedback” (FG1, EU, Leinster).
- “Seeing your skills play out in real-life situations.” (FG12, Ulster/Donegal).

Students also highlighted moments of recognition—such as positive feedback, scholarships, or lecturer acknowledgement—as important signs of success:

- *“Lecturers know you, ask how you are doing, they make a point of being kind…The students feel heard.* (FG19, Connaught).
- *“Getting a scholarship for high leaving cert points made me feel like I could succeed”* (FG25, Leinster).

Opportunities for students to take stock, refine their definition of success and reflect on what they’ve accomplished during their degree reinforces feelings of success:

-“My definition of success has changed over my time in college, particularly in 3rd and 4th year. It's less about the grades and more about the journey.” (FG25, Leinster).
-“ My confidence grows week by week with each class exercise and homework.” (FG4, Mature, Leinster).

-“I was considering dropping out last year because I had really poor attendance and I was missing a lot of like compulsory classes. And this year I decided to go and like really, you know, try and go to all my classes and I actually got elected as class representative this year as well. 2nd year I kind of made sure that I had a routine set out before I started.”(FG24, Leinster).
-“ Seeing growth and developing different skills that you didn't have before.” (FG11, Munster).
-“ I think the experience of being on professional work placement for me and getting through the year, like I'm in my last few weeks, so getting through a full nine months placement seeing that I had both the academic skills, the work ethic and communication skills to be able to ask for what I needed to actually be able to thrive in a work environment as a person with a disability. That was a moment of success for me, to be able to see that I'd gotten so far in my degree, I've come so far across the few years and I was actually coming back to this idea of that I was working towards being prepared to leave college and go into a profession even though I didn't feel that in semester two of second year.” (FG13, Connaught).
-“Reflections make you notice your growth over the years.” (FG5, Leinster).
-“ I think when you're younger that the definition of success is imposed. For example, success means to have good grades. Success means that you will be one of the best students. As you grow up, I think you

know and understand that there are failures, not everything will go as planned. And that's okay. So then you have a chance to define success in a different way." (FG26, International, Leinster).

Institutional Enablers

Students identified a range of institutional enablers that supported success, many of which aligned with best practice in research.

Support services. Counselling, peer mentoring, academic writing support, and disability services were frequently cited. However, availability and waiting times varied:
- "Counselling, even if it's limited to four sessions, still makes a difference" (FG13, Connaught).
- "The First Seven Weeks programme was crucial in helping me settle in" (FG10, EU, Munster).

Accessibility. Students valued institutional and pedagogic approaches to make material more accessible:
- "The disability office really changed my experience once I got diagnosed." (FG12, Ulster).
- "Having a maths support class that my friends and I went to that made a huge difference to all of our marks." (FG5, Leinster).

Staff relationships. The approachability of staff was a decisive factor in enabling success:
- "When lecturers make the effort to know your name, it makes a difference" (FG14, Connaught).
- "The involvement, help and experience lecturers share is amazing." (FG7, Munster).
- "Getting the seal of approval from your lecturers that you know what you're doing and you're doing it the way that you should. You're at the level, at the races, I guess." (FG20, Leinster).

Pedagogical Enablers

Teaching practices played a major role in how students experienced success. Students described inclusive and interactive approaches as highly enabling.
- *"Small classes facilitate good communication and connection with our lecturers."* (FG12, Ulster).
- *"Effective supports include flipped classroom with pre-recorded lectures, small groups meeting with lecturers for a catch up in one class."* (FG13, Connaught).
- *"Class getting to discuss feedback, then shown the Standard Deviation for the class, talking through the outcomes with the whole class."* (FG16, Connaught).

Conversely, students critiqued didactic and disengaging teaching practices:
- *"Hard to attend lectures where they read the slides in a mundane voice with no interaction."* (FG11, Munster).
- *"Some lecturers do not follow the course descriptor."* (FG1, International, Leinster).
-*"Class cancellation at the last minute - very hard when you have a long commute that is time consuming*

and expensive." (FG6, Leinster).
-*"Some of my lecturers are big in research, but they lack teaching skills."* (FG11, Munster)
-*"Communication between students and lecturers needs improvement - some (lecturers) don't answer emails."* (FG13, Connaught).

Authentic learning opportunities, such as placements and projects, were highlighted as particularly valuable:
- "So I was very nervous, you know, going into it (placement). And the first day or two was a bit rocky with kind of pacing for lessons. But then by the end of it, I was a lot more confident with it and I wasn't as stressed by the end. So I think that I improved throughout the two-week period for the placement." (FG13, Connaught).

Barriers to Success

Students were forthright about barriers, many of which aligned with the legacy and current issues outlined in Section 4.

Financial and accommodation pressures:
- "I currently live out of my suitcase for 4 days then going from place to place for the other 3 each week. You can't succeed if you don't have somewhere to live" (FG18, Connaught).
- "Working 25 hours a week, project after project in college, trying to find a routine that works. Very exhausting." (FG11, Munster).
-"Commuting, we're graded on attendance, and some people have a 3-hour commute - sometimes for just one class." (FG23, Leinster)

Mental health and wellbeing:
- "I was told the counselling service wasn't for me. I was told I was too complex of a case." (FG15, Connaught).
- "Ireland has had great steps in you know, taking into consideration of mental health, student satisfaction, the influence of the environment." (FG26, International Postgraduate, Leinster).

Lack of flexibility in policies and structures:
- "Work gets in the way of my attendance. College is my priority, but I have to work to be here. (FG5, Leinster).
- "Spread out assignments more evenly and give an assessment schedule for the semester" (FG2, Leinster).

Recommendations

Students recognise that not every barrier is within the control of the HEI and offered constructive recommendations for improving success. This prompted suggestions linked to identified barriers and good practice across several dimensions.

Wellbeing and financial supports:
- Expand counselling and mental health services (amalgamated FG responses).
- Provide financial aid, bursaries, and accommodation supports (amalgamated FG responses).
- “Reduce fees for a second degree in high-demand and needed skills (like medicine).” (FG9, Munster.

Pedagogical changes:
- More interactive, flexible teaching (amalgamated FG responses).
- Better feedback practices – timely, direct, clear (amalgamated FG responses).
- Greater use of blended learning, but with a strong human connection (amalgamated FG responses).
- “Psychometric tests for all students in first year help tailor education.” (FG27, Leinster)
- “More consideration for neurodiverse students, my friend has ADHD and with a 2-hour lecture just sitting there, she is crawling out of her skin due to her condition.” (FG6, Leinster)

Institutional culture:
- “More kindness and empathy in how students are treated.” (FG13, Connaught).
- “More facilities on campus. There is only one counsellor and only by appointment, the canteen closes at 3.00. Could we change these things?” (FG11, Munster).
-“Fund adult diagnostics for ADHD and other neurodivergent conditions.” (FG15, Connaught).

Employability and careers:
- Closer links between degrees and industry (amalgamated FG responses).
- “Internships every year so people know what their career will be.” (FG 7, Munster).
-“Competition in job market, do I have the practical skills to succeed in my career?” (FG1, International, Leinster)

Mental Health resourcing and recognition
- “Mental health should be recognized as a measure of success in college.” (FG6, Leinster).
-“Ensure students are staying healthy and modulate workload to help this.” (FG7, Munster).

Accessibility and agency:
- “Change policy around recording of lectures to accommodate all students. All policies should be designed with and in collaboration with students.” (FG13, Connaught).

Future Concerns

Students also reflected on their concerns for the future, often linking personal success with broader societal change.

- “AI as a threat to creative industries.”(FG5, Leinster).
-“Competition in job market, do I have the practical skills to succeed in my career?” (FG1, International, Leinster)
- “Future Employment – will I have to emigrate?” (FG1, Leinster).
- “My parents are retiring soon so I can't rely on them financially. I'm concerned about the PG fees for my course and how I'm going to get through.” (FG7, Mature, Munster)
- “War in Ukraine, work issues.” (FG1, Leinster).

5.3 Linking Student Voices to Research

The focus group findings align broadly with the research landscape. Students’ holistic definitions of success resonate with Kuh’s (2008) emphasis on high-impact practices, and with the National Forum Expert Group’s view that success is simultaneously student-defined, institution-enabled, and outcomes-oriented. The students framing success as balance, confidence, and wellbeing underscores that academic metrics alone are insufficient. Many participant student definitions of success change over their learning journey with a focus on grades in the early years of college moving towards a stronger emphasis on personal growth, networking opportunities and relevant work experience for future aspirations.

The barriers articulated by students mirror the structural and legacy issues described in Section 4 of this document. Financial precarity, commuting and accommodation insecurity emerged across groups as existential threats to success, echoing HEA (2023) findings from Eurostudent VIII. Concerns about AI and marketisation of higher education featured as well, supporting Bryant’s Horizon Scan Report (2025). Mental health concerns and counselling access reflect wider evidence of post-COVID-19 wellbeing fragility (Mothersill et al., 2024; Dost, 2025), reinforcing that wellbeing is a foundation rather than an add-on to student success. Pedagogical critiques—such as disengagement with lecture-heavy delivery—speak directly to the enduring tension between didactic traditions, interactive pedagogies and student-centred or partnership-based models.

At the same time, the enablers described by students illuminate how institutions can address these issues. Relationships with staff, inclusive teaching practices, student mentoring and authentic learning opportunities reflect international evidence on belonging, agency, and transition pedagogy. Students’ recommendations for empathy, flexibility, and involvement in decision-making further demonstrate the importance of co-creation and partnership, aligning with international calls for relational pedagogy and student-centred learning (European Students’ Union, 2024).

The conditions for success are relational, participatory, and systemic—as theorised in research but expressed here through lived student experience. They illustrate how legacy and current issues play out in practice and how institutional and pedagogical enablers can counteract structural barriers. In this sense, the focus groups not only validate but also humanise the conceptual frameworks of student success, grounding policy and research in the realities of student life. These insights can be used as inspiration for shaping the future of student success in Irish higher education, with the student voice at the centre of this transition.

The synthesis of student perspectives with research demonstrates that while Irish higher education has made significant strides, gaps remain between aspiration and reality. Students confirm that belonging, mattering, agency, and wellbeing are the cornerstones of success, but they also expose how financial precarity, pedagogical legacies, and uneven supports undermine these conditions.

6. What is New: Insights and Contributions from Student Voices

International research on student success is extensive, encompassing themes on retention, belonging, agency, wellbeing, course choice, and other related themes.

The voices of student in Ireland gathered through 27 focus groups in 2025 add to and sometimes challenge these frameworks. This section outlines the novel insights that emerge, highlighting what is new, unexpected, or distinctive about the Irish context and how it contributes to the wider discussion.

6.1 Success as Balance

While research has increasingly emphasised holistic wellbeing, the student in Ireland articulated a particularly powerful definition of success as balance. For many, thriving meant "being able to balance academics, personal life, family, hobbies and maintaining this happily and healthily." (FG11, Munster). This framing moves beyond institutional metrics or even abstract notions of wellbeing to capture the daily lived negotiations students face.

This insight underscores that policies and practices designed to promote success must attend to the daily realities of student life: timetabling, workload distribution, and the compatibility of academic expectations with work and family commitments. The concept of balance as central to success adds a distinctive dimension to international debates.

6.2 Recognition, Kindness and Mattering

The research highlights belonging and mattering as predictors of completion (Thomas, 2012; Strayhorn, 2018), but the focus groups revealed the specific language students use: kindness, recognition, and

being known. “I have one lecturer who, whenever they go away for a weekend, they always bring back sweets for the class to share. He's a very open and friendly person, he interacts with the class and asks how people are, it's a large class but he tries to remember our names, and the students attend his class - not just for sweets! Students go to class for enjoyment, the dopamine release when you have a good time while learning keeps students coming back.” (FG27, Leinster). “More kindness and empathy in how students are treated.” (FG13, Connaught).

This emphasis reframes mattering not just as institutional structures of inclusion but as everyday relational practices. Recognition by staff—through names, feedback, and empathy—emerges as a critical enabler. This nuance is underdeveloped in the literature and offers an important contribution: student success is not only about belonging to an institution but about being recognised as an individual.

6.3 Accommodation as an Academic

While financial precarity has long been recognised in higher education research, the students’ testimonies position accommodation insecurity as an existential academic barrier. “You can’t succeed if you don’t have somewhere to live” (FG18, Connaught). This stark articulation reframes student accommodation from a social or financial concern into a core academic condition.

This insight challenges institutions and policymakers to broaden the scope of student success strategies. Appropriate accommodation is not peripheral; it is fundamental to the capacity to participate in education. By explicitly linking accommodation to success, students surface a critical issue that is often siloed in social policy rather than integrated into academic planning.

6.4 Agency as Empathy and Flexibility

The research on student–staff partnership (Bovill, 2020; Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014) positions agency in terms of co-creation, curricular involvement, and governance participation. While students affirmed the importance of involvement in decisions, they also described agency in more relational terms: being treated with empathy, flexibility, and respect.

For instance, students called for flexibility around attendance policies, assessment deadlines, and recognition of diverse life circumstances. Agency, in this sense, is not only formal but lived—exercised through everyday encounters with staff and policies. This extends the research by highlighting how

institutional empathy and flexibility are themselves enablers of agency.

6.5 Valuing Counselling Supports

A new insight concerning the impact of counselling provision emerged. While long waiting lists were noted, students repeatedly emphasised that *"counselling, even if it's limited to four sessions, still makes a difference."* (FG13, Connaught).

This challenges assumptions in the policy research that success hinges only on large-scale expansion of services. Students' testimonies reveal that incremental supports matter. Even partial provision can reduce isolation, provide coping tools, and signal institutional care. This has implications for policy: small improvements in access may be more impactful than anticipated, especially when embedded in broader cultures of care. It is also worth noting there is pressure on HEIs to support all health care needs for all students and a national approach to external services has been recommended elsewhere, specifically in the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework – Review Report (HEA, 2025).

6.6 Digital Focus: Flexibility and Connection

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital learning globally, and research has focused on access, equity, and technology adoption. Students in Ireland, however, emphasised the relational dimension: "(Success is…) Passing exams, doing well academically and feeling like you're a part of something. Feeling comfortable in the environment, developing confidence and making connections. Feeling a part of a community." (FG7, Munster). "9.00 AM class was moved to hybrid to accommodate students on the bus that doesn't get in until 9.15." (FG19, Connaught).

This insight suggests that the debate is not digital versus in-person but how to design hybrid teaching that combine flexibility with opportunities for recognition, belonging, and human contact. Students value the flexibility of digital learning but resist approaches that feel impersonal. This contribution adds nuance to international debates, reframing digital transformation as a relational as well as technological challenge.

6.7 Future Concerns: Beyond Employability

International research often frames success in terms of employability. While students in Ireland affirmed the importance of careers, they also raised broader existential concerns:

- “The war in Ukraine, the economy, world issues – all are very concerning” (FG1, Leinster).
- “Generative AI impact on industry; how will this impact us?” (FG10, EU, Munster).
-“Future employment - possibility of emigration - Will I have to emigrate?” (FG3, Leinster).

This broadening of the frame is distinctive. For students in Ireland, success is inseparable from global uncertainties—AI, climate change, migration, and relevance of qualifications. These perspectives expand the discourse on success beyond institutional and national outcomes, situating it in planetary and geopolitical contexts.

6.8 Contribution to the Research

Bringing these insights together, the students in this study contribute five distinctive elements to the international discourse on student success:

1. Balance as the central marker of success.
2. Recognition and kindness as the operationalisation of belonging and mattering.
3. External factors such as cost of living, availability of affordable student accommodation.
4. Agency as empathy and flexibility, extending partnership theory.
5. Global concerns (AI, migration) shaping definitions of success beyond employability.

These contributions do not replace existing frameworks but deepen them, adding relational, material, and global dimensions that are underexplored in current research.

6.9 Implications

The implications of these insights are important. They call for higher education in Ireland not only to align with international best practice but to respond to the lived realities of its students. By integrating these insights—balance, recognition, external factors, relational agency, and global concerns—the Irish higher education system can take an international lead in reimagining student success for a complex and uncertain world.

7. Conclusion

This discussion paper has brought together international research, national policy, and the voices of students in Ireland. Taken together, these sources reveal that student success is best understood as a holistic, relational, and systemic construct—defined not solely by retention or completion, but by student responsibility, belonging, mattering, agency, wellbeing, and equity of outcomes. There are considerations for teaching and learning, including:

- Teaching practice in higher education continues to evolve. Students call for more interactive and inclusive practices, authentic learning, and relational teaching.
- Recognition and feedback matter. Simple acts—knowing names, giving personalised feedback—powerfully influence belonging and mattering.
- Flexibility supports agency. Attendance, assessment, and engagement policies must accommodate the diverse realities of students' lives.
- A culture of care facilitates success. Empathy, kindness, and relational teaching practices are encouraged as part of the daily academic experience.

The convergence of research, policy, and student voice points toward a shared vision for Irish higher education, a vision that situates student success as both a public good and collective responsibility. Student Success is:

- **Student-centred** – defined **with** students, not for them.
- **Equitable** – enabling success across all groups, not only to those already advantaged.
- **Relational** – grounded in kindness, recognition, and mattering.
- **Holistic** – encompassing achievement, wellbeing, personal growth, and future preparedness, facilitating mobility and fulfilment.
- **Systemic** – requiring coordinated action across institutions, government, and society.

The purpose of higher education is not only to produce graduates but to develop people who are confident, resilient, and ready to contribute to society in uncertain times. Student success, understood holistically, is both an ethical imperative and a strategic priority. As one student reflected, *"My definition of success has changed over my time in college… It's less about the grades and more about the journey"* (FG25, Leinster). Another captured this future-facing dimension clearly: *"Having confidence in myself to move into the future – that's real success"* (FG7, International, Munster).

The voices of students remind us that success is experienced in the everyday: in balancing work and study, in staff kindness, in the stress of finding appropriate student accommodation, in the relief of available counselling, and in the anxieties of a changing world. These lived realities make it clear that

policies and frameworks are only meaningful when translated into conditions that enable students to flourish.

Looking ahead, the challenge is not only to define student success but to make it real ensuring that belonging, mattering, agency, wellbeing, and equity are not aspirational but lived across the sector. In doing this, Ireland can support its students and shape international debates on what success in higher education truly means.

References

Astin, A. W. (1993). What matters in college? Four critical years revisited. Jossey-Bass.

Bandura, A. (2006). Toward a psychology of human agency. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 1(2), 164–180. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6916.2006.00011.x

Bersia, M., Charrier, L., Zanaga, G., Gaspar, T., Moreno-Maldonado, C., Grimaldi, P., Koumantakis, E., Dalmasso, P., & Comoretto, R. I. (2024). Well-being among university students in the post-COVID-19 era: A cross-country survey. Scientific Reports, 14, 18296. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-69141-9

Biewer, G., Buchner, T., Shevlin, M., Smyth, F., Šiška, J., Káňová, Š., Ferreira, M., Toboso-Martín, M., & Rodríguez Díaz, S. (2015). Pathways to inclusion in European higher education systems. ALTER, European Journal of Disability Research, 9(3), 278–289. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alter.2015.02.001

Bovill, C. (2020). Co-creating learning and teaching: Towards relational pedagogy in higher education. Critical Publishing.

Bryant, P. (2024). A horizon-scanning report on the changing demographic and pedagogical profiles of current and emerging university students and the responses of the global higher education to the generational challenges. N-TUTORR National Digital Leadership Network. https://www.transforminglearning.ie/resources-publications/a-horizon-scanning-report-on-the-changing-demographic-and-pedagogical-profiles-of-current-and-emerging-university-students-and-the-responses-of-the-global-higher-education-to-the-generational-challeng/

Bøe, T., Hysing, M., Lønning, K. J., & Sivertsen, B. (2021). Financial difficulties and student health: Results from a national cross-sectional survey of Norwegian college and university students. Mental Health & Prevention, 21, 200196. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhp.2020.200196

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching: A guide for faculty. Jossey-Bass.

Cullinan J, Flannery D (2023) Commuting and College Student Wellbeing, Centre for Economic Research on Inclusivity and Sustainability (CERIS) Working Paper Series, 2023/02. https://www.universityofgalway.ie/media/researchsites/ceris/files/WP-2023-02.pdf

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. (2024, September 6). *Student accommodation assistance*. Gov.ie. Retrieved from https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-

further-and-higher-education-research-innovation-and-science/services/student-accommodation-assistance/

Dooley, B., O'Connor, C., Fitzgerald, A., & O'Reilly, A. (2019). My world survey 2: The national study of youth mental health in Ireland. University College Dublin & Jigsaw. http://myworldsurvey.ie

Dost, G. (2025). Student well-being: The impact of belonging, COVID-19 pandemic-related stress, loneliness, and academic anxiety. Frontiers in Psychology, 16, 1481328. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1481328

Douwes, R., Metselaar, J., Pijnenborg, G. H. M., & Boonstra, N. (2023). Well-being of students in higher education: The importance of a student perspective. *Cogent Education, 10* (1), 2190697. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2190697

European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice. (2024). The European Higher Education Area in 2024: Bologna Process Implementation Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

European Commission. (2023). Flash Eurobarometer 530: Mental health. Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety. https://europa.eu/eurobarometer

European Students' Union. (2024). Bologna with student eyes 2024. ESU. https://esu-online.org/category-publications/bwse/

European Students' Union. (2024). Student rights charter. ESU. https://esu-online.org/policies/student-rights-charter-2/

European University Association. (2018). *Learning and teaching in Europe's universities: An EUA position paper*. European University Association. https://eua.eu/downloads/publications/learning%20and%20teaching%20in%20europes%20universities%20-%20an%20eua%20position%20paper.pdf

Felten, P., & Lambert, L. M. (2020). *Relationship-rich education: How human connections drive success in college.* Johns Hopkins University Press. https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/title/relationship-rich-education

Gravett, K., Taylor, C. A., & Fairchild, N. (2024). Pedagogies of mattering: Re-conceptualising relational pedagogies in higher education. Teaching in Higher Education, 29(2), 388–403. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1989580

Health promotion glossary of terms (2021). Geneva: World Health Organization; 2021. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240038349.

Higher Education Authority Act 2022 (No. 31 of 2022). (2022). Irish Statute Book. http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/31/enacted/en/html

Higher Education Authority. (2025). National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework – Review Report. https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2025/07/National-Student-Mental-Health-and-Suicide-Prevention-Framework-Review-Report.pdf.

Higher Education Authority. (2023). Eurostudent VIII report: Survey results for Ireland. Higher Education Authority. https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2023/04/Eurostudent-8-Final-Report.pdf

Iannelli C, McMullin P, Smyth E. (2024) Higher education retention in Ireland and Scotland: the role of admissions policies. High Educ (Dordr). 2025;89(4):1021-1039. doi: 10.1007/s10734-024-01259-1. Epub 2024 Jul 11. PMID: 40321905; PMCID: PMC12045830. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-024-01259-1

Kift, S. (2009). Articulating a transition pedagogy to scaffold and to enhance the first year student learning experience in Australian higher education. Final report for ALTC Senior Fellowship Program. Australian Learning and Teaching Council. https://transitionpedagogy.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Kift-Sally-ALTC-Senior-Fellowship-Report-Sep-092.pdf

Kinsella, M., & Fox, R. (2023). Belonging, mattering and becoming: The first year experience – TU Dublin case study. Technological University Dublin, QQI.. https://www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2024-04/belonging-mattering-and-becoming-the-first-year-experience-tu-dublin.pdf

Kuh, G. D. (2008). High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter. Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). https://navigate.utah.edu/_resources/documents/hips-kuh-2008.pdf

Lee, J., Jeong, H. J., & Kim, S. (2021). Stress, anxiety, and depression among undergraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic and their use of mental health services. Innovative Higher Education, 46, 519–538. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-021-09552-y

McCoy, S., & Byrne, D. (2011). "The sooner the better I could get out of there": Barriers to higher education access in Ireland. *Irish Educational Studies, 30*(2), 141–157. https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2011.569135

McTaggart, B. (2024). Fifty years on – limitations and opportunities within Ireland's higher education system and structures. *Policy Futures in Education, 22* (8), 1771–1793. https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103241238495

Molesworth, M., Scullion, R., & Nixon, E. (2010). The marketisation of higher education and the student

as consumer. Routledge.

Mothersill, D., Nguyen, H., Loughnane, G., & Hargreaves, A. (2024). Mental health among third-level students in Ireland during COVID-19. *Irish Journal of Education, 48* (3), 1–19. https://www.erc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/IJE_48_Mothersill-et-al.-2024.pdf

National Access Plan, A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022–2028. (2022). https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2022/08/Online-National-Access-Plan-2022-2028-FINAL-1.pdf

National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. (2019). Understanding and enabling student success in Irish higher education (Compiled by Lee O'Farrell). https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/understanding-and-enabling-student-success-in-irish-higher-education

National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. (2019). Understanding and enabling student success in Irish higher education. https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/understanding-and-enabling-student-success-in-irish-higher-education

National Student Engagement - NsTEP. (2021). Institutional approaches to student engagement during COVID-19: Insight report. https://studentengagement.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Insight-Report-Institutional-Approaches-to-Student-Engagement-during-Covid-19-WEB.pdf

National Student Engagement Programme (2021) Steps to Partnership. https://studentengagement.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/NStEP-Steps-to-Partnership-Doc-3.pdf

National Student Engagement Programme. (2020). The path to a new national approach to student engagement in decision-making: Discussion paper for students and staff across Irish higher education. NStEP. https://studentengagement.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/NStEP-Framework-Discussion-FINAL-WEB.pdf

National Student Engagement Programme. (2025). Census project report 2024–25. NStEP. https://studentengagement.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Census-Project-Report-2024-25.pdf

Oti, O., Foley, S., & Pitt, I. (2025). Students' attitudes and experiences toward mental health support services in Ireland: A qualitative study. PLOS ONE, 20(8), e0329905. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0329905

Pérez-Jorge, D., Boutaba-Alehyan, M., González-Contreras, A. I., & Pérez-Pérez, I. (2025). Examining the effects of academic stress on student well-being in higher education. Humanities and Social Sciences

Communications, 12(449). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04698-y

Rossouw, N., & Frick, L. (2023). A conceptual framework for uncovering the hidden curriculum in private higher education. Cogent Education, 10(1), 2191409. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2191409

SPARQS (Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland). (2023). Student learning experience (SLE) model. Scottish Funding Council. https://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/SLE_model_digital_resource.pdf

Strayhorn, T. L. (2018). *College students' sense of belonging* (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315297293

Technological Universities Act 2018 (No. 3 of 2018). (2018). Irish Statute Book. http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2018/act/3/enacted/en/html

The Lancet Psychiatry Commission on youth mental health, Mc Gorry, Patrick, C. Mei, N. Dalal, M. Alvarez-Jimenez, S. Blakemore, V. Browne, et al. The Lancet Psychiatry, Vol. 11 No.9, p731-774. https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(24)00163-9/abstract

Thomas, L. (2012). Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change: Final report from the What Works? programme. Paul Hamlyn Foundation. https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/hea/private/what_works_final_report_1568036657.pdf

Tinto, V. (2012). Completing college: Rethinking institutional action. University of Chicago Press.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *What you need to know about the right to higher education*. International institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) from https://www.iesalc.unesco.org/en/right-higher-education/what-you-need-know

Working Group on Student Engagement in Irish Higher Education. (2016). Enhancing student engagement in decision-making: Report of the working group on student engagement in Irish higher education. Higher Education Authority & Irish Research Council. https://www.iua.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/HEA-IRC-Student-Engagement-Report-Apr2016.pdf