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

Review of the Irish National Framework for Student Success in Higher Education

Report of the Expert Group

July 2025

Contents

Acronyms

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

ATU   Atlantic Technological University

DBS   Dublin Business School

DCU   Dublin City University

DkIT   Dundalk Institute of Technology

IADT   Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology

MIC   Mary Immaculate College

MTU   Munster Technological University

MU   Maynooth University

NCAD   National College of Art & Design

SETU   South East Technological University

TCD   Trinity College Dublin

TU Dublin   Technological University Dublin

TUS   Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands & Midwest

UCC   University College Cork

UCD   University College Dublin

UL   University of Limerick

Non-Higher Education Institutions

DFHERIS   Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

HEA   Higher Education Authority

NFA   National Forum Associates

NFETL   National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

NStEP   National Student Engagement Programme

QQI   Quality and Qualifications Ireland

1

Preface by Expert Group Chair

Irish Higher Education institutions (HEIs) are of course deeply concerned with student success. Large amounts of data are gathered, including monitoring retention and completion rates, grade distributions, student engagement with virtual learning environments, among many other activities. Academic educators consistently solicit feedback from students on their learning experiences in the lecture halls, laboratories and other field work sites, and seek to incorporate that feedback to achieve optimal learning outcomes. Students are encouraged to join clubs and societies, to study abroad, to take up work placements and internships, to avail of learning supports, career development services, counselling and other well-being initiatives. Irish HEIs encourage students to think of their participation in third level education as an opportunity to consider more broadly and holistically their talents and skill sets; to develop their agency and critical skills, as well as their potential to engage with and shape wider society. Irish HEIs understand that they are contributing broadly yet profoundly to intellectual, social, cultural and economic flourishing not merely of their students but to the communities that the students come from and will be engaged with in the future. Student success is therefore central to the mission and purpose of Ireland's HEIs.

The motivation then for this review was to reflect on how the sector as a whole might be seen to have engaged with the National Forum's Student Success Framework in 2019, which sought to create a shared understanding of student success. The purpose of this review has been to propose how Ireland's Higher Education sector might further develop a systematic and rigorous set of strategies to best embed and operationalise its core commitment to student success.

The Expert Group gathered national and international expertise on the student experience and engagement in learning and was informed by a deep understanding of the issues and challenges that exist in HEIs in Ireland and abroad. The Expert Group engaged extensively with stakeholders across Ireland's Higher Education sector, including HEI staff delivering a range of student services as well as those monitoring student engagement and achievements, and also met with relevant state agencies and student representative groups. The people who engaged with the Expert Group gave generously of their time and provided cogent examples of how institutions and bodies were actively engaged in ensuring student well-being, a sense of meaning and belonging, as well as educational attainment and other achievements. Perhaps most importantly, stakeholders also spoke frankly of where and how they were struggling with a lack of coherence in institutional responsiveness to all that is entailed in ensuring student success. The quality of engagement with the Expert Group by stakeholders is a clear illustration of the commitment and enthusiasm for real and sustained progress in this area – and the members of the Group were both inspired and grateful for that.

I would like to thank all the members of the Expert Group for their collegial engagement, and their prompt and thorough work throughout this review. I am honoured to have had the opportunity to Chair the process. I have learned much, not merely about how Ireland's HEIs are working to support student success, and how the sector as a whole might develop in this area, but I have learned from each of the members of this Expert Group how to better model a critical and rigorous analysis with an empathetic, warm understanding. Thank you all.

I would also like to thank Dr Ross Woods, Imma Zoppi and Rebecca Roper of the Higher Education Authority, for their exemplary support of our work.

Finally, the Expert Group recognises that there is a real opportunity in Ireland for HEIs to make a clearer focus on the discrete factors that are entailed in ensuring student success as it is defined and understood by students themselves. The Expert Group is deeply encouraged by both the depth of reflection and enthusiasm of all those we met with to embrace and support the agenda of concretely focusing on student success as a measure of how well Irish HEIs fulfil their intellectual and societal functions. We hope that our recommendations will contribute to strengthening the mission of Ireland's HEIs and to the concomitant flourishing of students and the wider society.

Katherine O'Donnell
Chair of the Expert Group

2

Executive Summary

Background

In 2019, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education published a report, Understanding and Enabling Student Success in Irish Higher Education and an accompanying Irish national understanding of student success. In October 2021, the National Forum launched a toolkit for embedding student success, Seven Cs for Embedding Student Success: A Toolkit for Higher Education Institutions. The aim of these publications and resources was to support student success in higher education.

From 1st January 2022, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education was established under the auspices of the HEA. The HEA has a statutory responsibility to promote and support student engagement and student success in higher education and the attainment by students of a high-quality educational experience in higher education. The new positioning of the National Forum offered a unique opportunity to review and renew the Framework for Student Success, and to support and monitor its implementation. In light of this and in line with the HEA's Corporate Strategic Plan 2023–26, the HEA commissioned a review to evaluate the impact of both the student success framework and toolkit since their launch in 2019.

Review of the Student Success Framework

The HEA appointed an Expert Group with expertise in the area of student success to carry out the review. The group prepared a report analysing progress and made a number of recommendations to support student success in higher education. This report was informed by desk review of relevant documentation and an extensive consultation process with various stakeholder groups.

Student success is at the core of the mission of higher education. Students make academic, social and economic investments in higher education, and higher education institutions invest resources, imagination and commitment in supporting students. Student success matters enormously to all those with a stake in the mission and purpose of higher education.

In its consultations the Expert Group heard strong continued support for many of the aspirations of the National Forum's 2019 "shared understanding" of student success.[1] However, concerns were also raised that the 2019 shared understanding, while valuable and valued as a guiding set of principles, had proved hard to translate into practice both for individuals and institutions across the sector. To date, few institutions have clearly articulated student success strategies. The 2019 shared understanding seems to be too broad to enable sustained institution-wide action. The Expert Group's report aims to help the HEA and institutions to review their thinking about student success, for the long-term success of Irish higher education and, perhaps more importantly, for the sake of its students.

Key Strategic Recommendations

Through the consultation process with key stakeholders, feedback from written submissions, and desk review of relevant documentation, the Expert Group identified three overarching thematic areas in relation to student success: Understanding Student Success; Strategies for Student Success; and Capacity Building.

---

1   "Student success optimises the learning and development opportunities for each student to recognise and fulfil their potential to contribute to, and flourish in, society. To be achieved, this requires a culture in Irish higher education that values inclusivity, equity and meaningful engagement between students, staff, their institutions and the wider community."

Under each theme the Expert Group has made the following key strategic recommendations:

Understanding Student Success

The HEA and higher education institutions should articulate a shared understanding which recognises that student success needs to reflect the diversity of student-definitions, institutional cultures, and outcomes.
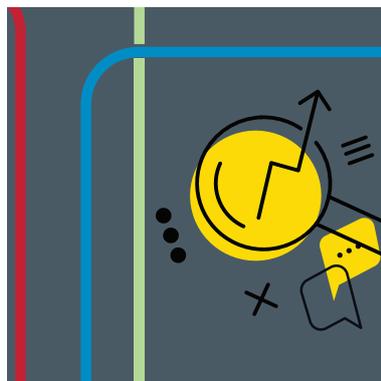
Strategies for Student Success

All HEIs should have in place up-to-date student success strategies, and the HEA, in consultation with HEIs, should develop guidance on understanding student aspirations and the student lifecycle, including on how to prioritise.
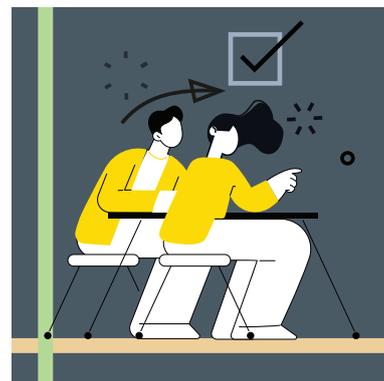
Capacity Building

The HEA should set a strategic objective to build sector capacity to embed student success across HEIs.

Expert Group Recommendations

The Expert Group also made a number of further recommendations under each theme, to help facilitate operationalisation of the strategic recommendations.

Understanding Student Success	
Recommendations	**Lead Stakeholder**
The vision for student success should be informed by extensive consultation with students, taking account of the diversification of student demographics, the breadth of support needs and issues of intersectionality.	HEA
Individual HEI staff, programmes, and HEIs should deploy this shared understanding in their daily work and strategic planning – recognising that different stakeholders prioritise different aspects of that shared understanding.	HEIs
Students should be engaged systematically at both institution and sector levels to co-develop and co-deliver initiatives building on this shared understanding.	HEA, HEIs
Institutional and sector initiatives including those on well-being, teaching and learning, engagement should be aligned with this shared understanding of student success so that these efforts are complementary and not in competition.	HEA, HEIs

Strategies for Student Success	
Recommendations	**Lead Stakeholder**
The HEA should set a clear deadline for the development of student success strategies, and work with institutions to ensure that they are regularly updated.	HEA
Collaboration and partnership across institutions should be embedded to develop and implement student success strategies (this includes collaboration between academic and professional services staff).	HEA, HEIs
Given the pace of change, a forum should be created to enable institutions to pool experiences of emerging trends and to meet, share strategies, success and challenges.	HEA, HEIs

Capacity Building	
Recommendations	**Lead Stakeholder**
The HEA, in consultation with HEIs, should develop guidance on best practice in using data to understand the student lifecycle and impact on student success, including clear guidance for institutions on how to prioritise areas of focus.	HEA, HEIs
The HEA and HEIs should establish a sector-wide user group to oversee the approach to resources which are designed to support practice on student success, building on the high standards set by the National Forum so that the resources 'speak to' the concerns of users.	HEA, HEIs
The HEA, working with the sector and the user group should ensure that the currency of resources is actively reviewed on a periodic basis.	HEA, HEIs
Case study materials based on real world practices should be developed to ensure that resources reflect the 'real world' of institutions.	HEA
The HEA should extend the remit of its Advisory Group on AI so that it can support thinking and appropriate implementation of AI and analytics tools to support student success across the sector.	HEA

Conclusion

Analysis of stakeholder feedback and national policy has led to the insight that higher education is at a moment of transformation. Academic success is no longer the only marker for achievement; the success of a student must follow the entirety of their development, from mental wellbeing to readiness in their career path to personal goals, all while navigating the difficulties of external pressures from the accommodation crisis to the need to take on employment additional to their studies.

The recommendations in this report build on those of previous national policy documents and add further nuance to the understanding of student success in Irish higher education. These recommendations require collaboration between educators, policymakers, and institutional leaders. That will ensure higher education achieves the transformational potential of improved individual student outcomes and the societal value of cultivating resilient, globally conscious, and aware graduates. Continuous monitoring, new adaptive strategies, and intensified investment will be necessary to ensure that every student flourishes academically, personally, and professionally.

3

Background

3.1 The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

Established in 2012, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education was the national body responsible for leading and advising on the enhancement of teaching and learning in Irish higher education.

From 1st January 2022, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education was established under the auspices of the HEA. A new HEA Student Engagement and Teaching and Learning Committee was also established to advise the HEA Board on the development and impact of teaching and learning enhancement in Irish higher education. The establishment of the National Forum in the HEA completes the implementation of recommendations following a 2017 review of the work of the interim National Forum which operated independently of the HEA.

3.2 The Irish National Framework for Student Success in Higher Education (2019)

Prior to 2022, the National Forum engaged in a partnership with the HEA in the area of student success to support the realisation of related actions in the National Access Plan and Higher Education System Performance Framework 2018–20 and complement ongoing work in the National Student Engagement Programme and StudentSurvey.ie.

In 2019, the Forum published a report, Understanding and Enabling Student Success in Irish Higher Education, which considered student success through three lenses. Firstly, it explored the concept of student success from the key perspectives of national policy and students, from the explicit strategic missions of Irish higher education institutions and from the international literature. It then examined a range of themes related to student success and how it can be supported. Finally, it looked at the development of an Irish national understanding of student success.

In October 2021, the National Forum launched a toolkit for embedding student success, Seven Cs for Embedding Student Success: A Toolkit for Higher Education Institutions (Seven Cs Toolkit). The toolkit, developed by the National Forum in partnership with the Higher Education Authority and a National Advisory Group, aimed to support the higher education community to take whole-of-institution approaches to the continuous enhancement of student success.

In addition to the above publications, the €5m 2020 Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning (SATLE) Fund supported the establishment of 74 enhancement initiatives across the sector, each with a strategic focus on transforming teaching and learning for student success.

The original framework and toolkit were developed as a resource for HEIs, and it remains unclear the extent to which they have been embedded and implemented. Further, there has yet to be a systematic mapping of student success strategies across Irish HEIs.

The HEA has a statutory responsibility to promote and support student engagement and student success in higher education and the attainment by students of a high-quality educational experience in higher education. The new positioning of the National Forum, operating under the aegis of the HEA, put it in a unique position to review and renew this framework, and to support and monitor its implementation. In light of this and in line with the HEA's Corporate Strategic Plan 2023–26, the HEA commissioned the current review to evaluate the impact of both the student success framework and toolkit since their launch.

4

Review Methodology
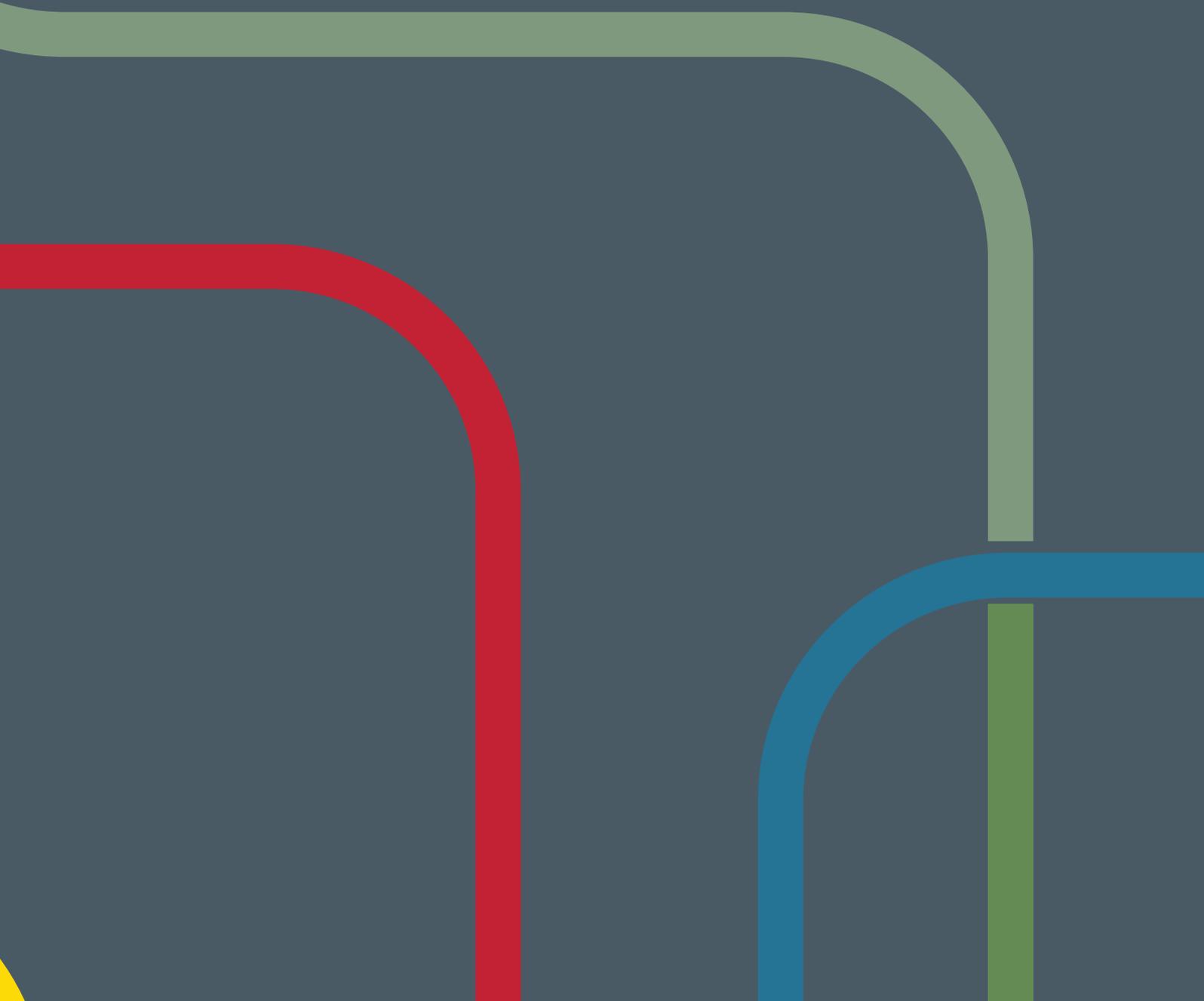
4.1 Expert Group

The review of the Irish National Framework for Student Success in Higher Education was launched in September 2024. The HEA appointed an Expert Group with expertise in the area of student success to carry out the review as follows:

- **Professor Katherine O'Donnell**, Chair (Professor of Philosophy, University College Dublin)

- **Áine Daly** (former TUS Students' Union President and NStEP Student Trainer)

- **Professor Chris Husbands** (Former VC Sheffield-Hallam)

- **Louise Banahene** (Head of Educational Engagement, University of Leeds)

- **Dr Mark Glynn** (Head of Business Development, Catalyst IT Europe)

- **Professor Peter Felten** (Executive Director, Centre for Engaged Learning, Elon University)

The analysis and recommendations of the Expert Group found in this report have been informed by an extensive consultation process. The review was undertaken in consultation with key stakeholders from the HE sector and relevant non-HEI organisations, as outlined below.

4.2 Desk-based review and policy analysis

From November 2024 to January 2025 the HEA Executive undertook policy and data analysis to provide the Expert Group with briefing on the current state of play in relation to previous National Forum work on Student Success. This included an overview of student success strategies in Irish HEIs and an analysis of use of the "Seven Cs for Embedding Student Success: A Toolkit for Higher Education Institutions" since 2021. The Expert Group was given access to HEA and National Forum publications relating to student success, as well as HEI Student Success Strategies. Additional documentation relating to relevant HEA policies was collated and shared with the Expert Group. The Expert Group undertook a desk review of all the above documentation as part of the review. A list of these document is included below at Appendix 2.

4.3   Stakeholder Consultations

Over the course of December 2024 and January 2025 the Expert Group engaged in an extensive consultation process with various stakeholder groups. In general, consultation meetings lasted an hour, and attendees were provided with sample questions that the Expert Group might ask in advance of the meeting. A member of the HEA Executive attended all the meetings.

Seven consultation meetings were held in total. The following is a list of stakeholder groups who were invited to attend these meetings (those who attended are listed in Appendix 3):

- AHEAD

- Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

- HEA Access Policy Unit

- HEA Statistics Unit

- Higher Education Institutions Access/Inclusion Teams

- Higher Education Institutions Senior Management Teams

- Higher Education Institutions Student Success Leads

- Higher Education Institutions Student Support Services

- National Forum Associates (NFAs)

- National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP)

- Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

- Students' Union Presidents

4.4 Written Submissions

Stakeholders unable to attend the meetings were given an opportunity to provide written feedback, which was then provided to the Expert Group. Attendees were also invited to submit additional feedback after each meeting. In total, three written submissions were received.

4.5 Expert Group Meetings

The Expert Group met monthly from November 2024 to March 2025 to discuss the review process, stakeholder meetings and the drafting of the final report and recommendations.

4.6 Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference for the Review of the Irish National Framework for Student Success in Higher Education were as follows:

The Expert Group will undertake a review of the Framework having regard to:

- Relevant National Forum Publications on the topic.

- Summary Report on HEI Student Success Strategies.

- Consultation with Students and Staff on Student Success in Irish Higher Education.

- Other submissions and inputs received.

- Meetings with stakeholders.

The Expert Group will report to the HEA on its conclusions and, specifically, will:

- Report on the advancement of embedding student success in institutional practices, having regard to national approaches in this area.

- Make five to ten high-level recommendations, taking into account national and international best practices, as to how, in the view of the Expert Group, higher education institutions might enhance their strategies and their implementation to support student success.

- Make recommendations on how the HEA, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), and other relevant state or non-state bodies might support student success in higher education.

5

Expert Group Analysis and Recommendations

5.1 Higher Education in Ireland and 'Student Success'

Student success is at the core of the mission of higher education. Students make academic, social and economic investments in higher education, and higher education institutions invest resources, imagination and commitment in supporting students. Student success matters enormously to all those with a stake in the mission and purpose of higher education. The HEA National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education puts it like this: "Higher education can open a myriad of doors for students of all ages, abilities and backgrounds. Through it, students can simultaneously deepen their learning and broaden their horizons. They can grow as citizens and flourish as individuals. They can uncover talents and abilities that they never knew they possessed and build the foundations for lifelong personal and professional development".[2] It was this profound commitment to student success which led to the publication of the Student Success Framework in 2019, requiring all Irish higher education institutions to have in place a student success strategy by 2020.

Since 2019, Irish higher education has changed substantially. The structure of the sector has changed, with newly merged institutions shaping their distinctive missions and strategies. Covid-19 challenged the sector in unprecedented ways. Post-pandemic transition issues are influencing students, staff, and institutions. Longer-term trends, including ongoing cost of living struggles, and longer term trends, including a rapidly diversifying student population further complicate efforts to enable student success. Rapid developments in technology, and especially generative Artificial Intelligence are changing institutional practices, student behaviour and wider assumptions about higher education.

Despite this dynamic environment, in our consultations we heard strong continued support for many of the aspirations of the National Forum in 2019, and the expansive and inclusive approach to a "shared understanding" of student success:

> *Student success optimises the learning and development opportunities for each student to recognise and fulfil their potential to contribute to, and flourish in, society. To be achieved, this requires a culture in Irish higher education that values inclusivity, equity and meaningful engagement between students, staff, their institutions and the wider community.*

However, we also heard consistent concerns that this 2019 shared understanding, while valuable and valued as a guiding set of principles, has proved hard to translate into practice both for individuals and institutions across the sector. In short, student success is highly valued yet so broad conceptually that in practice it tends **not** to guide daily or strategic work. Instead, despite the impressive work of student success champions across the sector, few institutions have clearly articulated student success strategies. The 2019 shared understanding seems to be too broad to enable sustained institution-wide action.

A further consequence of this gap between widespread, shared commitment and practical institutional implementation is that the individuals and teams responsible for leading work on student success tend to operate in ways which are not fully integrated into institutional thinking or strategy. This means that despite their commitment, and the very high calibre of the individuals themselves, they lack the positional 'heft' to bring about significant change in their institutions. There is strong commitment, and real talent involved in supporting student success, but developing sustained implementation plans appears, on the evidence we have seen, to be a challenge.

Finally, almost everyone we spoke to was keenly aware that these institutional issues were the background to rapid change in student needs: in the nature and diversity of student cohorts and in the sheer range and complexity of their learning and support needs. The combination of shifts in participation, the global pandemic, the more recent cost-of-living crisis and the widely acknowledged mental health needs, particularly of young people in the mid twenty-first century, all pose significant challenges for operationalizing student success.

Our task was to map a way through this landscape, and to help the HEA and institutions to review their thinking about student success, for the long-term success of Irish higher education and, perhaps more importantly, for the sake of its students.

---

2   https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/our-priorities/student-success/defining-student-success/

5.2 Understanding Student Success

Ireland's changing students

The Irish higher education sector has evolved rapidly. Increasingly, the student population reflects the broader demographics of Irish society. Institutional populations have grown and become more diverse. In recent years the ethnic diversity of the student population has changed significantly. For instance, while white Irish students accounted for 84.6% of the student population in 2017/18, that figure was at 74.8% in the most recent statistics published by the HEA for the academic year 2023/24. In the same period, the number of international students (EU, non-EU and GB) grew from 24,010 to 38,625, which signifies an increase of 60.9%.[3] HEA statistics show that in 2022/23, 17,526 students were in receipt of support under the Fund for Students with Disabilities. This represents a 136% increase in the number of students in receipt of FSD support compared to 2012/13. In 2022/23, the highest percentage of students supported by FSD presented with learning difficulties. The most significant increases in students receiving support under FSD in recent years are students with ADD/ADHD and Autism Spectrum Disorder. In 2022/23, 13.8% of new entrants to higher education have a disability. According to data from AHEAD, 20,351 students with disabilities registered with support services for the academic year 2022/23, which signifies a 110% increase over ten years.[4] 38.8% of students who were registered for supports for the academic year 2022/23 reported a Specific Learning Difficulty. This is a result of widening participation and should be celebrated: society benefits from more diverse universities, and universities benefit from more diverse student populations. But change brings new issues. Despite these strides in inclusivity and diversity, we were told that significant challenges now threaten student development. The rise in living costs, an ongoing accommodation crisis, and the increasing need for students to work while studying have undermined opportunities for engagement, leadership development, and overall well-being, whilst increasing risks to retention and completion.

Stakeholder feedback to us reveals that while participation has widened, many students, especially those who commute or work part-time or full-time jobs, are missing out on important extracurricular experiences. These experiences are crucial for fostering a sense of belonging but also for building global citizenship, leadership, and soft skills that modern employers demand and that society needs. In the course of our work, we came across innovative initiatives in HEIs in Ireland which were evidence of approaches designed to mitigate some of the threats to inclusion and to student development. The HEA should leverage the work of the National Forum and its National Resource Hub to map and share these.

Student success is no longer viewed exclusively in terms of academic achievement. It clearly includes both the academic and personal growth of a student, including the student's practical career skills, mental well-being and resilience in the face of mounting external pressures. As one of our respondents commented, "today's students seek opportunities to develop their life skills, obtain rewarding employment, and be best prepared for societal demands." As we have seen, however, too, many students are being deprived of these opportunities because of the escalating accommodation crisis which forces them into lengthy commutes or compels them to take on additional employment, severely limiting their capacity to participate in extracurricular activities.

The long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic plays an important part in the story of student engagement and success. The pandemic introduced a new dynamic in higher education. Institutions were forced to transition rapidly to online and blended learning. The disruption accelerated the adoption of new technological innovations, including AI-supported learning platforms and virtual laboratories, that have since become integral to delivering flexible and personalised educational experiences. In principle, these advances have enabled institutions to cater more effectively to diverse student needs. However, the reality is more complex. The transition to blended and online learning enabled students to continue to study during the pandemic and probably allowed students more control over the pace of their learning. The continued use of hybrid learning is thus a gain. But the ready availability of hybrid approaches **in combination with** the post-pandemic cost-of-living crisis may make it more difficult for, especially, disadvantaged students to engage with wider aspects of campus life. The gains in one direction create difficulties in another.

---

3   https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/

4   https://www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/free/AHEAD_Research_Report_23_digital_supplied.pdf Disability categories are Mental Health Condition, Significant Ongoing Illness, ADD/ADHD, Aspergers/Autism, DCD - Dyspraxia/Dysgraphia, Neurological/Speech and Language, Physical Disability, Deaf/Hard of Hearing, Blind/Visually Impaired, Specific Learning Difficulty and Other.

Student expectations are changing. One of our respondents put it simply, commenting that "The students of today aspire for more." Students now expect comprehensive support systems from the moment they apply. They demand academic excellence, robust career guidance, leadership development, and opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities that build essential soft skills and career competency. They are actively seeking universities that offer additional opportunities to build leadership, foster teamwork, and nurture global citizenship qualities that extend well beyond traditional lecture halls. Success is increasingly seen as a composite of academic achievement and personal development during enrolment. One stakeholder insight captures this evolution: "Academic success and professional achievements are not the sole desire, but a competing component with personal growth." At graduation, the definition of success expands even further. Modern graduates are expected to emerge as well-rounded individuals, possessing both subject-specific expertise and a broad set of soft skills critical for both contemporary citizenship and the modern workforce. As one stakeholder noted, "Students at the completion stage of their studies previously valued success solely on obtaining their degree. The shift we see in today's students is that they seek out opportunities to develop their life skills, obtain rewarding employment, and be best prepared for future societal demands."

A repeated challenge raised by the different stakeholders consulted is the accommodation crisis. With rising rental costs, many students struggle to secure affordable housing near their institutions. Those who must live farther away face lengthy daily commutes, disrupting academic routines and reducing campus engagement time. One stakeholder insight captures this issue: "Reports have highlighted that many students who cannot secure accommodation are commuting long distances each day, which has negatively disrupted the student's learning." The consequences are far-reaching. Long commutes impair academic performance and limit participation in vital extracurricular activities that help foster community, build leadership skills, and facilitate personal growth. The accommodation crisis thus represents a substantial barrier to student success. Financial pressures compel many students to take on additional employment alongside their studies. While part-time work can offer valuable experience and a crucial income, it often detracts from time devoted to academic pursuits or extracurricular involvement. One of our respondents said that "students are obtaining full and part-time employment whilst in their studies, which harms their academic performance and opportunity to attend lectures".

At the same time, mental health is emerging as a cornerstone of student success. Students face stress, anxiety, and uncertainty—challenges compounded by financial pressures, long commutes, and the need to balance work with study demands. Stakeholder feedback consistently points to the growing concern over mental health, with many emphasising that "The mental health and wellbeing of the student population is an increasing concern for higher education institutions". The Healthy Campus Charter & Framework for Ireland (2020–2025) reinforces this urgency by defining health as the capacity to achieve complete physical, mental, and social well-being. This framework argues that higher education institutions are uniquely responsible for creating environments where health and well-being are integrated into every aspect of campus life. This approach goes beyond being an additional aspect of academic support; it is fundamental to nurture resilience, empathy, and the ability to excel despite external adversities, especially with the broad demographic of the student body today in higher education. Investment in mental health support brings significant benefits for student success. Enhanced funding can lead to establishing comprehensive mental health programs that provide accessible resources, including increased counsellors, workshops, and innovating on additional supports students might need by having the resources and staff available. These programs would address immediate psychological challenges and equip students with vital coping strategies that contribute to their well-being. By prioritising mental health, educational institutions can create an environment where students feel supported, understood, and empowered to reach their full potential. Additionally, such investments foster a culture of awareness and openness, reducing the stigma surrounding mental health issues and encouraging students to seek help when needed. Ultimately, this leads to improved academic performance, higher retention rates, and the development of a more compassionate and resilient student body and future graduates.

We recognise that the pressures on Ireland's students have multiplied as a result of the cost-of-living crisis, the accommodation crisis and the long shadow of the pandemic. We also recognize that the nature of the student cohort has changed significantly. These are profoundly challenging times for students. With mounting evidence that the mental health and well-being of the student population is an increasing concern, a robust mental health support system is essential for helping students manage stress, perform academically, and foster personal growth. So too is the development of an environment that prioritises wellbeing.

This can be delivered through interventions, for instance, via provision of adequate student accommodation. It is important that the student education experience is delivered holistically and that it considers factors such as inclusive pedagogies, assessment and the role of academic advising. An effective support system would help to mitigate the impact that external challenges, such as financial strain and logistical barriers, have on student success. In this context, it is important that the HEA continue to implement the *National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework* and the *Healthy Campus Charter and Framework* and to align both frameworks with work that supports student success.

Defining student success

Ireland's universities are changing. Ireland's students are changing. These two dynamics underpin our approach to understanding student success. We began by thinking through definitions of student success, to reflect on changes since 2019 and to consider the new demands facing students and institutions. Participants in our consultations articulated three distinct yet complementary understandings of student success:

1. **Student-defined:** The meaning of 'student success' is – and should be – defined by students. Some students will understand success as entirely **career focused**, for instance, and others will frame it as having "**a fully rounded experience**" at university, yet others will frame it as including both **academic growth** and **personal well-being**. From this student-defined perspective, student success is individual and personal, eolving as a student progresses – not necessarily on a linear or continuous path – through their education. This means that understandings of student success are likely to vary across a range of identity, demographic, and other factors (commuter, mature-aged, etc.). It also means that students should be supported in articulating their understandings of and experiences with success in education and should be able to showcase these articulations to others.

2. **Institution-created:** 'Student success' is a **responsibility of the institution** and those who work within it. From this perspective, student success means the institution – through its staff, programmes, policies, and facilities – creates a positive educational environment where all students can learn, belong, thrive, and progress. This requires an agile institution that responds to students' needs and removes barriers to learning and well-being. It follows that the institution must nurture spaces where students feel a sense of belonging and mattering, and where students are empowered to use the supports available to them to pursue their educational goals. This perspective presumes that different institutions will understand student success somewhat differently, based on the characteristics and needs of their students.

3. **Outcomes-oriented:** 'Student success' is understood through the products of a student's education. From this perspective, student success is about the **value generated by educational experiences** and the degree. This can be framed strictly through **programme outcomes**, progression to **rewarding employment** or more broadly as graduating equipped to **thrive personally, professionally, and civically**. An outcomes approach to student success tends to focus on retention and progress at university since, by definition, students can only be successful by completing their academic program. This perspective allows for some variation based on student goals and institutional programs/mission, but the ultimate measures of success are a set of outcomes that are similar across the sector.

These three understandings are not mutually exclusive, but approaching student success from one tends to lead to practices, strategies, policies, and measurements that are distinct from others. Put simply, there can be path dependency from different starting points. For instance, an outcomes-oriented understanding may evaluate data on job placement rates as one important measure of success, but that same data might be much less salient for a student-defined or an institution-created understanding of success. On the other hand, student narratives about their experiences at university might be essential to evaluating the efficacy of a student-defined or institution-created understanding of success, but those narratives might be interpreted differently if the goal is determining whether a student can articulate their own path to success, or the institution achieved its programmatic goals.

The complex and contextual nature of student success, however, does not mean it is currently impossible to understand across the sector. Instead, we recommend developing a shared understanding that explicitly engages the primary perspectives and stakeholders in student success.

Key Strategic Recommendation

The HEA and higher education institutions should articulate a shared understanding which recognises that student success needs to reflect the diversity of student-definitions, institutional cultures, and outcomes.

Recommendations	Lead Stakeholder
The vision for student success should be informed by extensive consultation with students, taking account of the diversification of student demographics, the breadth of support needs and issues of intersectionality.	HEA
Individual HEI staff, programmes, and HEIs should deploy this shared understanding in their daily work and strategic planning – recognising that different stakeholders prioritise different aspects of that shared understanding.	HEIs
Students should be engaged systematically at both institution and sector levels to co-develop and co-deliver initiatives building on this shared understanding.	HEA, HEIs
Institutional and sector initiatives including those on well-being, teaching and learning, engagement should be aligned with this shared understanding of student success so that these efforts are complementary and not in competition.	HEA, HEIs

5.3 Strategies for Student Success

Shaping strategies for student success

As we have noted, staff in HEIs, regardless of role or level of seniority, reflected on student success in complex terms. They saw both the importance of supporting students individually to realise their goals as well as addressing institutional and systems metrics such as retention, continuation and completion. The understanding that student success permeated the whole student experience allowed colleagues to see it as a collective endeavour. For example, there was acknowledgement of the value of moving beyond existing good practice in widening access to supporting disadvantaged students to thrive and succeed once they had secured a place. However, the expansiveness of what might be termed student success also posed a challenge for the development of student success strategies in terms of scope, accountability or whether a student success strategy was required.

Despite the 2019 rubric that all HEIs should establish a student success strategy, our finding is that HEI strategies for promoting student success are not in place across every institution. There are several different reasons which were adduced to explain why institutions might not have a student success strategy, including:

- The pace of institutional change, including the merger of some institutions, which has meant that several key strategies have assumed a lower priority than might have been the case.

- Governance and leadership which does not reflect the institutional definition of student success or in some cases does not enable space to develop a definition and in turn a strategy.

- A sense that aligning the HEA student success framework with institutional culture posed severe difficulties. One institution reported perceptions of complexity in using the data and the framework to be able to develop a strategy.

- Competing priorities with some institutions needing to continue to focus on recovery from COVID or cost of living crisis etc, even though a well-articulated student success strategy would have been useful in shaping responses to these challenges.

Where a strategy was in place, it was normally informed by the HEA student success framework, data available and guidance on enablers. The breadth of the framework, its grounding in evidence and research and the availability of data through several sources were all valued by institutions. Some institutions reported strategies that reflected their local context, informed by data with leadership to drive change. Some institutions had standalone strategies and others had embedded the commitment into wider strategic plans. We are agreed that the HEA framework has had a positive influence on the development of strategies across the sector. However, this sharing of expertise was potentially more one way than it could be. There was not strong evidence of institutions working to learn from one another. Some institutions found the breadth of themes and resources harder to navigate and this was exacerbated when there was insufficient leadership or governance to support the process of considering student success at a strategic level.

Context, data and practice

Irrespective of whether strategies are in place, stakeholders cited the importance of data to understand context, to map student characteristics and trajectories, to identify gaps and to help construct an infrastructure to implement change. Many reported that they found the data collected and shared through government bodies, or collected in a standardised way across the sector, was useful and helped to build a picture. This is important in ensuring that institutional strategy can focus on the necessary actions and relevant elements of the HEA student success framework. Examples of this included StudentSurvey.ie, HEA statistics on student progression and data published by NGOs such as AHEAD. Another common example were programme surveys. Whilst there these core datasets are used more widely, additional data used to shape and inform strategies is variable. For example, some institutions used data from StudentSurvey.ie and/or institutional surveys to understand belonging or engagement. Other institutions referenced their desire to identify and use more real time data or to understand the experience of groups of students such as commuters. Several factors explained the differential approach we found in making effective use of data:

- Partly because of the breadth of definitions of student success, institutions found it difficult to make choices between the datasets which might be most useful to them; 'analysis paralysis' could flow, with insufficient clarity about the key metrics for different institutions.

- Institutions wanted more demographic data including at an intersectional level. One institution reported the importance being able to see 'data that highlights the experience of students who sit outside the average'.

- Institutions were keen to identify data that allowed for a full view of the student experience. In some cases, this acknowledged the gaps in data available in other countries. In others, it had the potential for paralysis as colleagues were asked to provide more data to validate their approach.

- Institutions appeared to struggle with articulating their student success strategy, and the key data which underpinned it alongside other student-facing strategies – for example, a teaching and learning strategy, or a student experience strategy. In this case, student success might fall between the cracks, or there might be insufficient focus on key at-risk groups. The absence of a Student Success strategy also limited the extent to which focused leadership or resource was in place to advance change.

- Institutions felt that there was a need for specific guidance on some key issues, including on understanding the needs of specific groups such as international, disabled or mature learners; guidance on co-creation of strategies with students; focus on belonging and connectedness; and additional support/staff development for staff.

We found that staff involved in distilling and sharing sector level data were clearly aligned with and working to support the vision for student success at a sector level and felt that they could be more useful to institutions. There is work to be done to

promote the visibility of their work, and to enable institutions to make more effective use of it. We return to questions of data later.

Innovation and development

We found a number of examples of good practice. For example, one of the institutions we spoke to formally recognises through a 5-credit module the work done and learning acquired by students within the university and outside clubs, societies, community work and extra-curricular activity in general. In this instance, the credits are recorded on the degree parchment. The initiative illustrates how formal recognition of extracurricular engagement can enhance students' career prospects. Initiatives like this are important but need greater emphasis and investment to impact more generally on student success.

We also found examples of the multiple impacts of institutional activity. Extracurricular activities such as clubs, societies and volunteering opportunities in the community can be vital to nurturing well-rounded, globally aware citizens. These engagements serve multiple functions; they promote inclusion, they combat isolation; they strengthen motivation; they build resilience and leadership skills; they can develop important employability skills which can be a significant differentiator in the job market. However, for many students, especially those impacted by the accommodation crisis and the demands of additional employment, these opportunities are often the first to be sacrificed. Limited time on campus translates into fewer chances to cultivate the soft skills critical for personal growth and future careers.

Key Strategic Recommendation

All HEIs should have in place up-to-date student success strategies, and the HEA, in consultation with HEIs, should develop guidance on understanding student aspirations and the student lifecycle, including on how to prioritise.

Recommendations	Lead Stakeholder
The HEA should set a clear deadline for the development of student success strategies, and work with institutions to ensure that they are regularly updated.	HEA
Collaboration and partnership across institutions should be embedded to develop and implement student success strategies (this includes collaboration between academic and professional services staff).	HEA, HEIs
Given the pace of change, a forum should be created to enable institutions to pool experiences of emerging trends and to meet, share strategies, success and challenges.	HEA, HEIs

5.4 Capacity Building

Using the Student Success toolkit

As we have noted, there is a very strong policy commitment both centrally and in institutions to securing success for all students. This commitment was articulated to us by policy advisers, senior institutional leaders and those with operational responsibility for both access and inclusion. As we have noted elsewhere, there is a clear understanding, and a strong consensus amongst our respondents, that the nature of 'success' is not linear or straightforward, that the student population in Ireland's universities has become more diverse and, in the wake of the global pandemic and subsequent cost-of-living crisis, in need of greater support to navigate a route through higher education.

The National Student Success framework is clearly expressed. The 2019 documents are clearly laid out and are easy to navigate; one of our respondents said that the Student Success Framework was "overall an extremely comprehensive and valuable document" and we agree. However, looking through our engagement with stakeholders we found a sharp distinction between

those who readily engaged with and used the materials available, who tended to be well-networked across the system, and a larger number who did not appear to do so. The former were adept users of the guidance, but the latter were often only vaguely aware of it. Our view is that this was not a consequence of the quality, clarity or usability of the materials: when drafted they were clearly written and presented, and they remain so. The framework and toolkit drew on, and make use of, a wide range of materials published between 2014 and 2016 on key issues including student engagement, transition into higher education and propensity to not progress. These materials are also clear and engaging, though there was a perception that the digital tool was somewhat difficult to use. At the same time, civil society and non-governmental organisations have developed their own resources to support and engage students with specific challenges (for example, neurodivergence). There is a lot of material available, much of it engagingly presented and digitally accessible.

Against this background, there seem to be three challenges for the resources developed by the National Forum:

1. The first challenge, which emerged overwhelmingly from our engagement with stakeholders, is that for busy staff in institutions, who themselves have had to navigate institutional change, there is a huge agenda to address. This merits further consideration in the context of resources. First, as noted elsewhere, the quantity, nature and complexity of the challenges faced by an increasingly diverse student population has created a significant increase in workload for all those engaged in supporting student success in institutions. There is simply much more for people to do. Secondly, too few institutions had clearly articulated **policies** and **strategies** for student success. Without a clear institutional strategy, key staff are left to reconcile competing demands on their time. Into this situation, excellent resources have been published, but there is a tendency for them to have been thought about in terms of supply rather than demand: more thought could be given to how resources might 'land' with those in institutions who will have to use them.

2. The second challenge is that there is a strong sense that the nature of the student cohort, and the demands faced by students have both moved on quickly since the student success framework was developed and certainly since the supporting materials on which it drew were developed. This is a phenomenon which is not unique to Ireland: universities around the world are navigating the challenges of changing student populations and rising demand for support and engagement. Resources have not necessarily become out of date – the principles on which they are built are sound and remain valid. But the specific challenges facing students have accelerated quickly.

3. The third challenge is more complex. There are strong networks across Irish higher education and people know each other well. But there was a sense that key staff **within** institutions appeared to be somewhat isolated. This was partly at least a consequence of what seemed to be the relatively poor development of institutional strategies for student success, which may itself have been a symptom of the rapid institutional change which the Technological Universities have had to navigate. But few of the staff we spoke to were able to talk confidently about their engagement with senior staff or the strategic direction of the university. We were consistently impressed by their commitment and thoughtfulness, their professionalism and the way they described their values, but also noted the extent to which they were operationally rather than strategically focused.

What makes for a successful resource?

As we have noted, the resources available to support student success are extensive and comprise both those produced directly by the National Forum and by civil society and non-governmental organisations. Our view is that the Irish higher education sector is well-supported by materials which are analytically sound, clearly written, internally coherent and, certainly in the case of the student success framework and some of the non-governmental materials, thoughtfully and imaginatively designed. These are an excellent starting **input** point.

We believe that good materials share some characteristics beyond design and clarity: they are usable, transferable and effective for users. These are **impact** rather than **input** focused, and here there is perhaps some work to be done. We noted above that the materials which are available did not always seem to have 'landed well' in HEIs, and that there was scope for greater use of

materials to shape policy and practices. This is not a characteristic of the materials which exist, but of developments we have already described: the rapid pace of change in institutions, the changing nature of the student body, and the sense of overload which characterised respondents with responsibility for student success. There are, commented one respondent, just too many things to be aware of.

Using data effectively to drive student success

Data is one of the most powerful resources at the disposal of policy makers, institutional leaders, student success practitioners and the wider group of stakeholders. What data is collected, how it is stored and made available, how it is used to evaluate success strategies, how it drives benchmarking, how it can be used predictively and how institutions can build their capacity to make effective use of data – these are all critical questions. The breadth, depth and range of data which is now potentially available to the sector is extraordinary. The challenge is to make effective use of it and, as important, to build individuals' capability to make confident use of it.

In this section of the report, we probe in more detail the quantitative and qualitative sources of data which are available and, perhaps more important, consider how the sector can become more confident in its use of data to support student success.

Academic engagement is traditionally linked to student success. Universities analyse quantitative metrics including demographic profiles, attendance rates, persistence and retention rates from semester to semester and, course completion rates and academic performance trends. All institutions reported using these quantitative metrics to measure student success with some institutions having dedicated resources to develop and interpret reporting dashboards. Most notably ATU have made considerable moves in this regard with the creation of a new leadership position as "Head of Student Success". It is worth noting that all institutions that have been involved in mergers (to form the Technological Universities) cited the challenge of collating and sharing data because of having "different systems" and processes in place in each institution. In complete contrast, at a sector level, the positive impact of the data sharing agreements that HEA statistics unit have established with key stakeholders has led to significant progress in the collation and analysis of quantitative data.

Most of the institutions represented during the focus group interviews cited StudentSurvey.ie as a key quantitative source for evaluating student success. Several referenced the importance of developing a "sense of belonging" in students with some representatives highlighting specific questions within the national survey that they analyse in relation to student success. Institutions highlighted the weakness of StudentSurvey.ie in that some of the questions are dated. In addition, they cited the lack of the ability to "drill down" into the data at a program level. StudentSurvey.ie is currently being revised and a new undergraduate survey is due to run in 2026, which may address some of these issues.

Beyond self-reported measures, universities can track students' engagement in various academic and extracurricular activities as an indirect measure of belonging. High levels of participation in student organisations, cultural groups, mentorship programs, and campus events often indicate a stronger connection to the university community. Conversely, a lack of involvement may signal that a student is facing accommodation struggles or needs supplemental employment, but the result is a disengagement from the university community. Data points that can be analysed include membership and participation in student organisations, attendance at campus events, workshops, and extracurricular activities, involvement in peer mentoring or faculty-led research programs, and use of academic and support services, such as tutoring, advising, and mental health counselling.

Tracking students' interactions with these resources can help universities identify groups that may be struggling to integrate into campus life and develop targeted interventions to support them. Little evidence emerged during the focus groups of institutions measuring data of extracurricular activities. However, DCU's movement of their support resources from their website to the VLE to enable more detailed tracking of student interactions with the support resources through the VLE is an example of good practice due to the depth of the data now available to them. Surprisingly outside of this example from DCU there was little mention of institutions taking a university wide approach to analyse VLE data to help monitor student success.

It is essential to disaggregate data by demographic groups to ensure that all students, particularly those from historically underrepresented backgrounds, experience a sense of belonging at similar levels.

Comparing belonging indicators across these groups such as race, gender, disability status etc. can help universities identify disparities and tailor initiatives to support underrepresented or marginalised students. For example, if data show that first-generation students report lower levels of belonging, the institution may develop mentorship programs that pair them with faculty or upper-year students who have shared experiences. During the focus groups participants cited the positive impact of the National Access Plan being focused on a particular student demographic as opposed to the broad stroke application of student success across the entire institution. While participants recognised that each institution has its own context, they called out the benefits of collaboration across the sector and sharing of approaches and case studies.

While surveys provide broad insights, qualitative methods such as focus groups, and one-on-one interviews offer deeper understanding by capturing students' personal narratives and experiences. These sessions can explore nuanced topics like how students navigate social and academic spaces, their experiences with discrimination or microaggressions, and the impact of mentorship or peer relationships. Open-ended discussions can reveal emotional and psychological aspects of belonging that are difficult to quantify, such as feelings of isolation, imposter syndrome, or empowerment. By conducting interviews with diverse student populations—such as first-generation college students, international students, or students from marginalized backgrounds—universities can gain a more nuanced understanding of how different groups experience belonging on campus. Some institutions have established institutional mechanisms for conducting student focus groups which can act as a sounding board for Student Services on new initiatives and resources. They help to ensure that services are student-centric, accessible, inclusive, and responsive to student need. It is an excellent approach to systemising the collection of student feedback and embedding the student voice into university processes. This could be replicated across all institutions.

Finally, some of our respondents told us that the time involved in conducting qualitative analysis is prohibitive in most cases and stated that the main reason is the limited resources (people) available to conduct such research. Some participants reported that there is a perception that this work is not valued by senior management as it is not specifically called out as a measurable action within the strategic plans of their institution.

Artificial intelligence and predictive analytics

One of the most important changes in the landscape of student success since the publication of the national framework has been the rapid development of technology, and, most recently, of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI). This is a fast-moving field. Its proponents claim that AI could be a transformative tool in higher education. AI technologies, it is said, can revolutionise how students learn, how educators deliver instruction to a diverse student body, and how institutions manage their resources. These tools can analyse data to provide personalised learning experiences for students with disabilities, identify at-risk students early, and streamline administrative processes. It is claimed that AI-driven learning tools can assess individual student performance in real-time, tailoring course materials to meet each learner's unique needs. Adaptive learning systems can modify instruction's pace, content, and complexity based on student progress and feedback.

There are examples of how AI can be used to support Student Success such as the use of chatbots and AI tutors. The more immediate and less controversial use of AI would be to support the analysis of qualitative research relating to student success. By integrating AI into qualitative research, researchers can process vast amounts of data more efficiently, reducing the challenge of limited resources. Text analysis of posts, hashtags, and online surveys can reveal common themes in student discourse, such as feelings of inclusion, and or positive experiences with faculty and peers. AI models can also condense long-form interviews or focus group discussions into key points, allowing researchers to quickly grasp main ideas. If, as suggested in the National Forum's 2015 paper on why students leave higher education, institutions adopted a common form to capture why students withdraw from their course, AI could be used to get sector wide insights.

Sceptics raise concerns. In addition to concerns about the underlying ethical and long-term engagement issues, they cite the lack of convincing evidence that the changes claimed for AI are happening, that they are happening at scale outside AI-industry-funded projects at elite institutions, or that they are meeting the educational needs of diverse students at diverse institutions. Whilst in principle, institutions have the capability to deploy adaptive learning platforms which enable the diverse needs of students to be met, sceptics point out that there are often too many underlying foundational challenges facing information collection, management and deployment in institutions, whose systems are not geared for advanced analytic capability.

Most progress has been made in the deployment of predictive analytics. Tools that identify patterns in student performance, enable institutions to predict and intervene with at-risk students before challenges escalate. For higher education institutions to fully leverage the transformative potential of AI, increased investment, including in underlying data operability, is essential. Allocating resources to upgrade technological infrastructure, develop adaptive learning systems, and integrate AI-driven analytics will improve academic outcomes and enhance institutional efficiency. This investment is critical for creating a dynamic, responsive educational environment that meets the evolving needs of students.

We found real excitement about the potential of predictive analytics and enhanced technology tools to drive improved student success and enhanced differentiation. As one of our respondents put it "Integrating AI-supported learning, virtual labs, and customised educational approaches enhances student engagement and academic performance." But in practice, there remain huge hurdles for individuals and the sector: the investment in technology platforms required to keep up with changing demand, the sheer costs of cloud-based storage, the gap between the potential of technology and the capability of individuals and institutions to make effective use of it are all reasons for caution as well as engagement. If the potential of AI to drive student success is to be realised, it will require consistent and sustained leadership at both sector and institutional level.

Key Strategic Recommendation

The HEA should set a strategic objective to build sector capacity to embed student success across HEIs.

Recommendations	Lead Stakeholder
The HEA, in consultation with HEIs, should develop guidance on best practice in using data to understand the student lifecycle and impact on student success, including clear guidance for institutions on how to prioritise areas of focus.	HEA, HEIs
The HEA and HEIs should establish a sector-wide user group to oversee the approach to resources which are designed to support practice on student success, building on the high standards set by the National Forum so that the resources 'speak to' the concerns of users.	HEA, HEIs
The HEA, working with the sector and the user group should ensure that the currency of resources is actively reviewed on a periodic basis.	HEA, HEIs
Case study materials based on real world practices should be developed to ensure that resources reflect the 'real world' of institutions.	HEA
The HEA should extend the remit of its Advisory Group on AI so that it can support thinking and appropriate implementation of AI and analytics tools to support student success across the sector.	HEA

6

Conclusion: Success in Student Success

Analysis of stakeholder feedback and national policy has led to the insight that higher education is at a moment of transformation. Academic success is no longer the only marker for achievement; the success of a student must follow the entirety of their development, from mental wellbeing to readiness in their career path to personal goals, all while navigating the difficulties of external pressures from the accommodation crisis to the need to take on additional employment to their studies.

Formal recognition of extracurricular engagement can provide a promising model for ensuring that all students, particularly those who, due to socio-economic disadvantage and/or logistical constraints, cannot engage and demonstrate their potential fully. However, although such recognition is valuable, institutions need to be alert to the challenges facing those students who, by virtue of their circumstances, find it difficult to engage with extra- or co-curricular provision. In addition, utilising AI in education could be a key step towards progress. Personalised learning and adaptive learning support systems powered by AI can help tailor educational experiences to the individual needs of each student, improve academic performance, and facilitate early intervention for developing challenges.

However, bringing about these transformative changes will require more significant investment. The Irish higher education sector needs continuous funding to upgrade technology systems, invest in mental health, and provide student accommodation to encourage 360-degree student success. Higher education can adapt to the changing world through flexible learning models, expanded service provisions, and innovative ways to credit students for non-formal education.

These recommendations require collaboration between educators, policymakers, and institutional leaders. That will ensure higher education achieves the transformational potential of improved individual student outcomes and the societal value of cultivating resilient, globally conscious, and aware graduates. Continuous monitoring, new adaptive strategies, and intensified investment will be necessary to ensure that every student flourishes academically, personally, and professionally.

Appendix 1:
Expert Group

Chair: Professor Katherine O'Donnell

Katherine O'Donnell is Professor of Philosophy at University College Dublin. She graduated from University College Cork with a first-class honours BA (winning the prize Peel Memorial UCC Student of the Year) and then studied journalism. Katherine joined RTÉ in 1987 but a year later she was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship, and she went to study for a Master's at Boston College. She went back to UCC to write a Ph.D. dissertation on the influence of Gaelic culture on the aesthetics and political theory of Edmund Burke (1729–1797). In 1995 she was awarded a scholarship to study at the English Department of the University of California at Berkeley. She spent two academic years there and wrote the bulk of her dissertation while at CAL. In 1997 she joined the Women's Studies Centre (WSC) at University College Dublin and became Director of the WSC for ten years until 2015 when she joined the School of Philosophy where she lectures in the History of Ideas and feminist & gender theory.

Áine Daly

Àine Daly is a dedicated student leader and advocate with extensive experience in student representation, governance, and policy. She began her journey as a class representative and an active member of student societies, progressing into key leadership roles. She served as Vice President for Welfare and Accommodation, was twice elected as President of AITSU, and became the inaugural President of the TUS Students' Union. She was a member of the merger team who established TUS, contributing to the university merger process as a member of key steering committees. Over four years, she served as a Student Governor, playing a vital role in shaping institutional policies. Beyond her university, she was actively engaged in national student governance, serving on the governance and campaigns committees of the national student union. Internationally, she was a Steering Committee member for the European Student Assembly under the European Universities Alliance and acted as Student Chair for TUS within the Regional University Network (RUN-EU). She also worked as a trainer with NStep, helping to empower student representatives across Ireland. She holds a degree in Social Care and is nearing completion of her MSc in Public Policy at DCU.

Professor Sir Chris Husbands

Chris Husbands is a university leader, educationist, academic and public servant with extensive experience in public sector leadership, knighted for services to education in 2018. For eight years, he led Sheffield Hallam University, one of the UK's largest, most diverse universities, winning national awards for teaching quality, enterprise, social mobility and community engagement, whilst reshaping institutional strategy, organisation and performance, and before that led the Institute of Education, University of London, a world-leading specialist research intensive institution rated first in the world in three successive years. He has more than 20 years of board-level and chair experience, leading national policy initiatives in schools, higher education and public policy to drive system-wide improvement, working across the political spectrum nationally and internationally; he has chaired the Teaching Excellence Framework, the Higher Education Statistics Agency and serves of a range of advisory and executive boards. His writing, conference addresses and journalism includes more than 750 outputs and he has lectured and consulted in four continents.

Louise Banahene

Louise Banahene, Director of Educational Engagement & Student Success at the University of Leeds, provides leadership of services and areas of work focused on enriching the learning experience with a strong focus on equity and inclusion, including leadership of the Access and Student Success strategy. In 2017 she was awarded an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours for services to higher education and holds Principal Fellowship with Advance HE.

Her external roles include trustee of the Tutor Trust and board member for a UKRI/OfS advisory group focused on widening access to PGR study.

Dr Mark Glynn

Mark is the head of Business Development for Catalyst IT with responsibility for the EU, Middle East and Africa regions. Mark is an AdvanceHE Principal Fellow, one of only 1700 worldwide. This fellowship is international recognition of his sustained record of strategic leadership in higher education. Mark has a substantial understanding of the education landscape and its unique dynamics due to his experience working within the education sector for over 20 years. He has extensive involvement in a variety of national and international networks supporting the education sector. Following on from four years working across the Institute of Technology sector, Mark joined DCU as Head of Teaching Enhancement, a role which he held for ten years. Through this role he expanded his network through active involvement in the National Forum for Teaching & Learning. This has resulted in numerous collaborative projects between DCU and other HEI's as well as invitations as a keynote speaker on various topics such as Academic Integrity, Universal Design for Learning, Digital Learning and Curriculum Design. Through leading numerous teaching and learning initiatives in areas including blended learning, technology enhanced learning, learning spaces, student retention and assessment, Mark has developed a local, national and international reputation for innovation and for leadership in teaching and learning. He has provided consultancy to higher education institutions across Ireland and also in Germany, Georgia and Vietnam.

Professor Peter Felten

Peter Felten is professor of history, executive director of the Center for Engaged Learning, and assistant provost for teaching and learning at Elon University. He has published seven books about undergraduate education, including *Connections are Everything: A College Student's Guide to Relationship-Rich Education* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023) co-authored by Isis Artze-Vega, Leo Lambert, and Oscar Miranda Tapia – with an open access online version free to all readers. His next book, *The SoTL Guide: (Re)Orienting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, is co-authored by Katarina Mårtensson and Nancy Chick, and will be published in late 2025. He is on the advisory board of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and is a fellow of the Gardner Institute.

Appendix 2:
Resources for desk-based review and policy analysis

HEA Publications

- Analysis of Non-Progression among Higher Education New Entrants in Ireland, 2016/17 to 2021/22 (2024)

- Graduate Outcomes Survey (2023)

- HEA National Student Mental Health and Suicide (NSMHS) Prevention Framework (2020)

- Healthy Campus Charter and Framework (2021)

- Higher Education Institutions Performance Agreements 2024–2028 (2024)

- National Access Plan: A Strategic for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022–2028 (and supporting data)

- Non-Progression and Completion in Irish Higher Education Data Dashboard (2024)

- PG Stats (2015/16 to 2021/22) (2022)

- StudentSurvey.ie

- Students Data - Key Facts and Figures 2023/24 (2024)

- Students Socio-economic Profiles 2020/21 (2021)

- System Performance Framework 2023–2028 (2023)

- UG Stats (2017/18 to 2023/24) (2024)

Higher Education Institutions Student Success Strategies

Standalone Student Success Strategies

- ATU Student Success Strategy

- DkIT Student Success Strategy

- MIC Student Success Strategy: Building our Community

- MU Student Success Strategy

- TUS Transition and Student Success Strategy

National Forum Policy Documents

- 'Making A Difference' A Student View of Excellent Teaching (2021)

- Developing Learning Analytics Policies to Support Student Success (2021)

- Embedding Student Success: A Guiding Framework (2021)

- Reaching Out: Student Drop-Out (2015)

- Reaching Out: Why Students Leave (2016)

- Resources to Support Development of Data-Enabled Student Success Strategies (2016)

- Seven Cs for Embedding Student Success: A Toolkit for Higher Education Institutions (2021)

- Student Non-Completion on ICT Programmes (2015)

- Students as Partners (2016)

- Towards a National Understanding of Student Success (2019)

- Transition from Further Education and Training to Higher Education (2016)

- Transition from Second Level and Further Education to Higher Education (2015)

- Transitions of International Students into Higher Education in Ireland (2017)

- Understanding and Enabling Student Success in Irish Higher Education (2019)

- What Does it Take to be a Teaching Hero? Exploring students' perceptions and experiences of impactful, transformative teaching in Irish Higher Education (2021)

- Why Students Leave: Findings from Qualitative Research into Student Non-Completion in Higher Education in Ireland (2021)

Other

- Overview of SATLE-funded projects (2024)

- Overview of student success strategies in Irish HEIs (2024)

- Overview of Higher Education Institutions Performance Agreements 2024-2028 (2024)

Appendix 3:
List of Stakeholders

The following is a list of stakeholders who attended consultation meetings with the Expert Group.

Government Departments

- Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Higher Education Institutions Access/Inclusion Teams

- MTU Access/Inclusion Teams
- TU Dublin Access/Inclusion Teams
- TUS Access/Inclusion Teams
- UCD Access/Inclusion Teams

Higher Education Institutions Senior Management Teams

- ATU Senior Management Team
- DCU Senior Management Team
- MIC Senior Management Team
- MU Senior Management Team
- TCD Senior Management Team
- TU Dublin Senior Management Team
- TUS Senior Management Team
- UL Senior Management Team

Higher Education Institutions Student Success Leads

- ATU Student Success Lead
- IADT Student Success Lead
- SETU Student Success Lead
- TU Dublin Student Success Lead

- UL Student Success Lead

- University of Galway Student Success Lead

Higher Education Institutions Student Support Services

- UL Student Support Services

National Forum Associates

- DBS National Forum Associate

- DCU National Forum Associate

- DkIT National Forum Associate

- MTU National Forum Associate

- NCAD National Forum Associate

- UCC National Forum Associate

- UCD National Forum Associate

- UL National Forum Associate

- University of Galway National Forum Associate

Non-Higher Education Institutions

- AHEAD

- HEA Access Unit

- HEA Statistics Unit

- NStEP

- QQI

Students' Union Presidents

- ATU Students' Union President

- SETU Students' Union President

- TU Dublin Students' Union President

Appendix 4:
Stakeholder consultation meetings

The following is a list of questions that were used in semi-structured consultation meetings with stakeholders. See Section 4.3 for a list of stakeholders who attended meetings.

1. What do you understand by the term student success? Do you use the NFETL "shared understanding" of student success or some other definition? How would we modify the current definition ("understanding") of student success?

2. What are the strengths/weaknesses of the Student Success Framework?

3. In your context, how have understandings of student success changed since 2021 and why? In your context, what progress do you think has been made on implementing the NFETL Student Success Framework since 2021?

4. Do you have an institutional strategy for promoting student success and evaluating/monitoring it? Can you give an example of what data is collected and how it is used?

5. Do you have any comments on materials prepared by NFETL on student success (e.g. National Forum Student Success Toolkit)?

6. Given your context with the Irish higher education sector, what do you consider are the future areas of critical importance to promote/support student success in Irish higher education?

7. What further policy initiatives or coordinate actions are needed to promote/support student success in Irish higher education? Which student groups are, in your view, most at risk of not sharing success and why?

HEA

An tÚdarás um Ard-Oideachas
The Higher Education Authority

Higher Education Authority
3 Shelbourne Buildings
Crampton Avenue
Shelbourne Road
Ballsbridge
D04 C2Y6

Contact
Phone: +353 1 231 7100
Lo-Call Number: 1890 200 637
Email: info@hea.ie