

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Enhancing digital teaching and learning: A students as partners approach

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ABSTRACT

The following article presents a review and reflection on digital teaching, learning, and assessment (TL&A) in higher education (HE) in the context of the emergency *pivot* to online delivery during the pandemic, as experienced by the Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning (EDTL) student interns across multiple disciplines and institutions. The project was led by the Irish Universities Association (IUA, <https://www.iua.ie/ourwork/learning-teaching/digital-learning/>) and funded by the Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA, <https://hea.ie/>). Additionally, this review draws upon previous literature related to successful staff-student partnerships, advocating the inclusion of the student voice in all aspects of teaching and learning, specifically in relation to the adoption of digital technologies, assessment, and teaching strategies within education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the original interns ($n=7$) representing HE universities in Ireland in 2021. Key findings from this study highlight a strong sense of inclusion, partnership and collaboration within each intern's institution.

KEYWORDS

partnership, collaboration, inclusion, student voice

The focus of the following article describes the digital teaching and learning experiences through the eyes of third-level students whose primary objective was to provide a *student voice* in both the development of relevant and appropriate learning artefacts, alongside their interactions with teaching and support staff, in their role as Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning (EDTL) project interns. Research has shown that illuminating the potential value of the *student voice* within higher education curriculum design can provide significant benefits (Gravett, Kinchin, & Winstone, 2020). Initially a three-year project, the project focused on the objectives of enhancing undergraduates' digital skills and improving the digital learning experience for all students as they “navigate the modern world of learning”, (Caena & Redecker, 2019). It became evident that both

academic and support staff needed additional training in digital skills enhancement. A preliminary idea focused on developing a singular digital resource package that could, in essence, be rolled out to each university. In addition, the original project idea was to listen to and understand the issues and goals within each institution. However, it became quite evident that a *one-size-fits-all* approach would not work. As such, the project began to evolve with the introduction of a Four Pillars foundational approach (see Table 1). From this point forward, the project accumulated a diverse team of members, including student interns, academics, learning technologists and staff support services.

Table 1. Enhancing Digital Teaching & Learning (EDTL): The Four Pillars foundational approach

NOT STARTING FROM ZERO	PEDAGOGY FIRST	DISCIPLINE FOCUS	STUDENTS AS PARTNERS
Recognizing digital literacy and issues from within each institution, and aim to build on existing resources, experience, and expertise within the universities and at a national level.	A focus on teaching needs and goals. Our work is not technology-led; we aim to start with the pedagogical needs of a group or individual, and consider how technology might be used to support these.	Our aim is not to build technology champions, but instead to raise the level of digital competence across a discipline, school, programme group or team.	We are working with students as key members of the project at all levels.

The development of authentic staff-student partnerships within the project was underpinned by its “students as partners” (SaP) framework, as originally discussed by Lowney et al. (2019). A key area of this framework includes reorienting digital learning towards a dynamic based on partnership within each institution by focusing on:

- student-centred co-creation of content (curriculum design)
- collaboration with teaching staff and institutions
- digital integration and leveraging technologies
- self-directed learning (developing self-study content and strategies, with an emphasis on planning, implementation and relevant assessment)
- real-world learning
- learning communities

The project ran from January 2019 to November 2023. Over its lifetime, a total of ($n=25$) students were employed as interns. The rationale for developing the following article provides context for the students-as-partners process and further encapsulates the student intern experience, while

highlighting recommendations from interns on how higher education institutions in Ireland can best work with students in a partnership approach as part of their role within the EDTL project.

Initially focused on key areas of brainstorming and subsequent idea sharing across institutions, this project acquired a new perspective following the inclusion of its first student intern as an academic partner. While acknowledging the importance of the interns' input, the team quickly realized that "...it was far easier to enhance the student experience when the student voice was truly heard and applied to the development of the academic agenda" (Flynn, 2022, p. 7). The pivotal moment for the project was in November 2019 when pilot projects within each of the institutions were launched. Moreover, it was at this time that the introduction of the very first EDTL student intern was officially made via a webinar to the wider EDTL community. This initial webinar became part of a series over the lifetime of the project, with each monthly webinar promoting the progress of each institution, as well as developing an underpinning of collaboration amongst its project members to an online audience of its peers from across the country.

In February of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Ireland. As a consequence, the Irish government began closing schools with the first stay-at-home order, issued on March 27, 2020, that banned all non-essential travel and contact with others. An initial impact included a call for academic staff to immediately support a temporary online pivot in higher education (Hickling et al., 2021; Nordmann et al., 2020). As such, the pandemic has played a significant role, as it initially exposed challenging experiences related to the digital competencies of both student peers and educational practitioners alike (Núñez-Canal, de Obesso, & Pérez-Rivero, 2022). Moreover, the impact on students' mental and physical health, in particular the sense of isolation and disconnect as discussed by Buckley et al. (2021) was quite evident from the initial lack of engagement by students as a consequence of early adoption of online teaching strategies. In the early stages, not only did the majority of students disengage, but they also experienced emotional exhaustion alongside a distinct pressure to succeed (Klinkenberg, Versteeg, & Kappe, 2023).

Some suggest the emergency pivot to online in early 2020 opened a potential Pandora's box to teaching and learning. One of the first artefacts developed by the EDTL project focused primarily on the planning of effective teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. The formal introduction to emergency remote teaching and the subsequent transition in HE towards a more student-centred online landscape have provided potential opportunities related to the required inclusion of rigorous and inclusive pedagogical practices (Flynn, 2021). Encouraging students to critically evaluate is equally important to stimulating and cultivating creativity as they co-create their learning experience. In addition, designing relevant assessments and feedback became high priorities and particularly challenging when developing academic integrity (Guangul, Suhail, Khalit, & Khidhir, 2020).

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

In adapting our T&L online during the pandemic, the research will initially explore how the EDTL model advances our understanding of partnership and potentially provides a critical examination of key partnership processes. As students become more active participants in their own learning,

this inquiry further investigates the extent to which student interns contribute to discussions, problem-solving, and co-creating knowledge with peers, providing unique insights from partnership practices within their institutions. This inquiry also seeks to gain insight into the discussions and the subsequent choice of digital tools adopted, as well as the pedagogical innovations applied to support partnership and collaborative dynamics, ultimately enhancing student learning. Within a wider context, this article further questions the potential format of programme delivery that can enhance learning opportunities and, as such, develop and innovate in any future digital education provision.

As a direct consequence of moving from a teacher-centred to a more student-centred approach, one of the key overarching questions guiding this article is the potential for developing partnerships and collaboration. Including institutional stakeholders, students, academics and support staff, with particular focus on the dynamics of student participation practices, their impact, and how these could be developed, enhanced, and sustained under such challenging circumstances as part of institutional partnership initiatives.

PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION

As we seek an understanding of partnership and the subsequent key partnership processes included within the EDTL project, we discover that its sole purpose has always been focused on the student experience. The project was quick to discover that students were “more than capable of creating their own academic legacy, and that their voice was necessary to achieve such a goal”, (Flynn, 2022, p. 31). Through cross-institutional initiatives, student interns were presented with an opportunity to share in the responsibility for shaping DTL&A, as they subsequently developed student resources and supports, in addition to building and strengthening reciprocal partnerships both locally and within a wider national context. Following in the footsteps of the Steps to Partnership conceptual framework by the Irish Educational Authority (NStEP) in 2016, the implementation of the EDTL internship programme focused on partnership and collaboration across each of the seven HE institutions. Master’s, doctoral, international, and undergraduate students ensured that their voices and those of their fellow students, whom they represented from all perspectives of academia, were heard loud and clear.

The concept of SaP within higher education is depicted as encompassing collaboration among students, staff, and academics in teaching and learning (Fedoruk, Wright, Anowai, & Osondu, 2021). This process of student-faculty partnerships is firmly underpinned by three key guiding principles, including respect, reciprocity, and responsibility, as previously defined by Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten (2011). In reflecting this, a recent systematic review of SaP in higher education by Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) highlights the (a) importance of reciprocity in partnership, (b) a required space in the literature to share the realities of such partnerships, (c) a focus on small-scale partnership activities, and (d) a move to inclusive partnered learning communities. As a consequence, many institutions in HE have previously developed initiatives that firmly position the student voice in the areas of curriculum development, content development, and extracurricular activities (Baumber, Kligyte, van der Bijl-Brouwer, & Pratt, 2020; Beckingham, 2020; Bovill, 2020; Godbold, Hung, & Matthews, 2021). Cultivating student partner relationships does not include a *one-size-fits-all* approach; however, key to effective

partnerships is the central idea of developing "partnership learning communities", as amplified by Hall, Velickovic, and Rajapillai (2021), reflecting on early research by Healey, Bovill, and Jenkins (2015).

Across each of the seven HE institutions, interns were formally involved in the review, piloting and promotion of teaching resources developed within the EDTL project. Project members were acutely aware that key barriers to adopting any SaP framework have in the past included student-staff power dynamics, a failure to compensate students for their time, a failure to implement students' feedback and lastly a lack of knowledge on avenues of student-staff partnership (Flynn, Ongolly, & Fhionnlaoich, 2023). With this in mind, interns alongside university staff and project members collaborated in the ideation and implementation of various workshop conferences at both a local and national project level. Additionally, they collaborated on the creation of artefacts developed primarily to resonate with current student needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While seeking insight and guidance on the nature of SaP from previous academic research, an early inquiry by Fielding (2001) highlighted a then-new radical approach to consulting students, focusing on the various aspects of their experience of schooling, known as *students as researchers*. This early study exemplifies the move from students as *education recipients* to becoming *agents of change*, and further highlights the mutual shared responsibility and shared achievement necessary in building an 'inclusive educational community' whereby "...students are directly involved as change agents and partners within the system" (Collins et al., 2016, p. 16). Of particular interest too is an earlier *university-driven* quadrant exemplified by Brown and Nurser (2011), which presents a theoretical framework for engaging students as change agents. While the appeal of the student voice is powerful, previous institutional policies have primarily focused on underrepresented and marginalized groups, while highlighting the need for a more proactive institutional *listening mode* (McLeod, 2011). In contrast, we must acknowledge the recent inquiries that successfully emulated how "working in partnership with students will enable students to become more self-directed learners and active citizens" (Bron, Emerson, & Kákonyi, 2018, p. 1), and additionally, the extensive research conducted by Varwell (2021) highlighting seven key historical models that "visually represent and contextualize partnership" (p. 114).

Drawing on the "fostering of reciprocal relationships", the literature also shows us how institutional responses can potentially positively impact student motivation to both learn and flourish (Knox, Hawkins, & Wilson, 2020, p. 1). Recent SaP pedagogical approaches describe how "...[f]undamentally, collaborative working with students as partners is about building meaningful relationships that challenge traditional teacher-student dynamics and breaks down hierarchies to reposition students and staff as colleagues and peers to one another" (Healey & Healey, 2024, p. 6). As a consequence, the focus of inclusive student representation as part of teaching and learning in HE provides a pathway to empowering learners to improve their existing experiences and subsequently for those who follow in the future, (Stoker & Cole, 2025). Students in this instance were no longer viewed as simply passive consumers of educational content; rather, they evolved into active participants, contributing to discussions with their peers and to wider circles within their own institutions.

The key focus within the EDTL project of building and developing staff-student partnerships, both within and across the HE institutions, provided opportunities that ensured each university became authentically informed by the student voice. During the lifetime of the project, each of the institutional interns became active participants in project activities and communications, including co-creation of supports and digital student resources, active participation in meetings, focus groups and webinars. In essence, claiming ownership of the developed learning artefacts while further highlighting the paradigm shift of student roles from **education recipients** to **change agents**. As such, the EDTL model was positioned to advance an understanding of partnership and, ultimately, through a partnership lens, to provide a unique critical examination of partnership processes.

METHODOLOGY

To fully understand the development of partnerships and collaborations between student interns and staff and how both can be sustained and developed within a HE institution, an empirical study was formally designed and conducted. Utilizing a series of interviews and additional observations, this hands-on empirical examination is based in real educational settings across universities in Ireland, providing analysis and interpretation of the qualitative data collected. Traditionally, face-to-face interviews have been the norm in qualitative research; however, due to the COVID pandemic, it was agreed that these discussions would take place online via Zoom in July of 2021. A total of ($n=7$) interviews took place with each of the initial seven project interns, from various disciplines, across each of the HE institutions in Ireland, as they answered a series of open-ended questions as detailed in (Appendix A). A thematic analytical approach, as promoted by Braun and Clarke (2006), was systematically adopted following the recording and transcription of each interview. In adopting this approach, the researcher believed it would provide an accurate, methodical way to yield insightful, trustworthy, and meaningful insights from conversations with each student intern. Ethical approval in this instance was not required as each of the interns is named as a co-author within the study.

DATA ANALYSIS

By applying the six-step guide to conducting a qualitative thematic analysis of the data collected from interviews, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) the researchers began working through each of the six defined phases, as detailed below

1. Familiarizing yourself with the data: Transcribing data, reading and re-reading the data while noting some initial ideas
2. Generating initial codes: Coding interesting features within the data and collating these to each specific code
3. Searching for themes: Collating codes into potential themes
4. Reviewing themes: Check relevant connections between themes and relevant codes. Generate a thematic map of the data analysis
5. Defining and naming themes: Clearly define appropriate themes from ongoing analysis

6. Producing the report: Provide a scholarly report of the data analysis, linking back to the original research question and literature

In maintaining consistency and enhancing reliability in the coding, the authors have leveraged NVivo software to both manage and organise the coding system.

FINDINGS

This analytical framework provided the ability to identify key codes and corresponding related themes from the analysis to enhance reliability. As a result, four key themes were identified from the interviews: Teaching & Learning, Assessments, Content Delivery, and Communications. All four dominant themes and their corresponding sub-category codes are listed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Dominant research themes and codes

TEACHING & LEARNING	ASSESSMENTS	CONTENT DELIVERY	COMMUNICATIONS
Partnerships	Continuous assessment	Synchronous online	Lecturer contact
Collaboration	Group work	Asynchronous	Feedback
Adopted technologies	Examination	Face-to-face	Program/module
Tech confidence			
Netiquette			
Intern Projects			
Intern experience			
Challenges and concerns			

The findings are primarily based on the four key themes and corresponding sub-category codes derived from the data analysis: Teaching and Learning (T&L), Assessment, Content Delivery, and Communication. Additionally, while focusing on insights from partnership practices, we primarily focus in this article on the sub-categories highlighted specifically under Teaching and Learning, including Partnerships, Collaboration, Intern Projects, Intern Experience, and Challenges and Concerns, to help address our initial aims and objectives.

Theme: Teaching & learning

I really felt last year that I had a complete lack of ‘live’ interaction with people. – Intern (1)

For many students, the move to online T&L in March of 2020, while providing some initial positive experiences, did, however, highlight the lack of face-to-face interaction with academic staff and peers, which could not be replicated within an *online* context (Yang, 2021). Consequently, as the

current analysis suggests, when students were asked in Q2 what worked well and what didn't and why, they discussed how low levels of engagement were evident across institutions, particularly when students were frequently expected to log in and watch recorded materials with long duration times. This lack of live interaction with lecturers, compounded with low levels of classroom engagement and low levels of interaction with peers, had a significant impact on initial perceptions and experiences of remote teaching and learning:

There [are] definitely some (lecturers) who made a very, very conscious effort, even when content didn't really allow for watching, when it was kind of note format, and they've arranged like additional question and answer sessions and that sort of thing. It at least brought in the sense of your class or discussion element to the content. – Intern (2)

Interviews further highlighted several other challenges and concerns related to online etiquette, with some lecturers finding online messaging and notifications a distraction. In some regard, interns report students feeling short-changed with fully remote teaching. Underpinning the theme of Teaching and Learning, the following subcategory codes are detailed as follows, including: Partnerships, Collaboration, Intern Projects, Intern Experience, and Challenges and Concerns.

Partnerships

Students' engagement in learning and teaching is necessary to enhance academic practices, which provide mechanisms to support the development and enhancement of learners and teachers' partnerships. (Sah, 2021, p. 2)

Following focused discussion and agreement, interns were collectively involved in the development and review of digital artefacts, including 2–3 minute video clips and infographics and providing relatable and relevant materials during COVID, within five different categories identified as of particular relevance:

1. Reflection on the Emergency Pivot
2. Consider your Students
3. Consider the Content & Activities
4. Consider Communication & Engagement
5. Consider Assessment & Feedback

You definitely have to consider the student voice. – Intern (6)

In June of 2020, the interns, in partnership with their institutional staff/project colleagues, developed and presented a series of webinars on the five areas of relevance above. Each of the project webinars was open to all academic staff, students and guests across Ireland. The development of a social media campaign adopting the hashtag #IUADigEd “*Your Education, Your*

Voice, Your Vision" began to connect with peers, promoted by project participants and interns across all social media platforms.

When asked question #1 (Q1) of the survey to discuss their experiences as interns, particularly with the development of partnerships and collaboration, the student interns were keen to discuss how partnerships had evolved as a consequence of their EDTL role. In highlighting their role as part of a group of academic advocates within the University of Limerick (UL), Intern (1) describes their proactive role with academic staff and students discussing their requirements and needs. Similarly, Intern (2), in their role as an intern with University College Dublin (UCD), became actively involved with the UCD Orientation team while engaging with various staff across their campus, including the students' union.

For Intern (3), their role at Maynooth University (MU) included working in partnership with the Critical Skills Department to develop tutorials on creating and editing videos and podcasts, and working with the Students Union provided a significant opportunity to develop a 'best-practice' policy across departments within the university. As an EDTL intern in Maynooth, Intern (3)'s involvement with the "Introduction to Teaching, learning and Assessment in Higher Education" module provided them with a significant opportunity to directly speak and listen to staff feedback. Also at Maynooth, Intern (4) describes engaging with academic staff within the School of Business and developing a series of student resources. The intern further highlighted their partnerships with the students' union, libraries and the VP for Education. This included the development and launch of various social media campaigns across the university.

Additionally, the project team at Maynooth University (MU) initially focused on the area of Academic integrity, thus establishing an institutional culture of shared responsibility for, and commitment to, academic honesty. This included local discussions, staff-student workshops, development of related support resources and the leveraging of social media platforms to engage the student population (Munro et al., 2022). EDTL intern (4) further described how they were provided with unique access to lecturers and the Head of Department, providing them with that "holistic view" of college life. For Intern (5) at the University of Galway (NUI Galway), liaising with the students' union representatives and staff across the university, alongside working on various projects with the Learning Technology Centre (CELT), was described as being very beneficial and extremely rewarding. In focusing particularly on the area of developing partnerships, the EDTL team at DCU focused initially on gaining a "clear picture of any existing gaps in students' digital skills and help with planning future digital skills support", (Flynn, 2022, p. 32). This involved the development of focus groups tasked with addressing questions related to digital skills.

While recent research provides an affirmative narrative for a SaP approach, it is equally important to acknowledge potential challenges, such as resistance to students becoming partners, existing university structures, and a lack of diversity. The medium to long-term effects of the pandemic are very likely to have a significant impact on the future of teaching and learning. As such, research suggests that adopting a SaP approach has been identified as "...a means of working within resource-constrained environments and optimizing educational experiences for students and staff alike" (Whelehan, 2020, p. 1). As Whelehan further argued, the student voice is often absent from making any meaningful change, but a culture of student partnership, pedagogically focused on enhancing digital learning, can provide the necessary foundations within a post-pandemic era.

Collaboration

I liked the ability to do things online and group projects to a certain extent, and like I think meeting online was actually really useful because it meant people were, you know, there wasn't the issue of getting everyone into the same room." – Intern (3)

As we investigated how interns contributed to discussions, co-created knowledge with peers, and engaged in partnership practices within and between institutions, we focused on the key area of collaboration. In their answer to Q3, Intern (1), based in UL, described collaborating with academic staff on student feedback from semester one, to discover how and what resources they could develop to meet the needs of students potentially struggling across the university. In collaboration with other EDTL Instagram team members, Intern (1) was able to develop a series of resources. Moreover, the intern particularly emphasized their successful collaboration with the IT department and the library, with the inclusion of digital skills workshops for staff (developed by EDTL project lead, David Maloney). From a student perspective, the intern additionally describes the affordances of working online when collaborating with their peers, highlighting its accessibility and effectiveness.

Meanwhile, in UCD, Intern (2) highlighted a unique insight into the collaborative effort they and other EDTL colleagues were focused on when working with the college student union on the Microsoft Office training program, which was available to all students. As a result, Intern (2) successfully gained their Microsoft certification and helped promote the benefits of the program across the university to their peers. Like most other interns, Intern (2) played an active role in collaborating on several webinars, including a diversity and inclusion presentation with University College Cork (UCC). Similarly, Intern (6), based in Trinity College Dublin (TCD), describes initially being very proactive with student-to-student online collaborations using Microsoft Teams when sharing content. This continued as other EDTL colleagues used Teams, Zoom, and Google Docs to develop resources and content for the EDTL project. As Intern (6) further noted, "[Our collaboration] was entirely online and, you know, I think we still managed to produce very collaborative, sometimes quite complex pieces of work."

Moreover, Intern (6) played an active and significant role in collaborating with the Academic Practice team at Trinity College, providing a student voice and perspective in developing relevant materials. In this collaborative role, Intern (6) successfully developed several key resources, including handbooks for students related to hybrid learning and digital assessment, self and peer assessment and preparing their study space. For Intern (3) (Maynooth), the online space provided the freedom to "bounce" ideas off one another, as they collaborated with their peers and other interns to develop resources and campaigns in collaboration with the institution's student union. Additionally, as part of this process, Intern (3) actively expanded the social media presence of the SU via Instagram and Facebook channels. For the interns at Maynooth, the building of relationships with the EDTL project team was key to their success:

So we kind of like, yep, yeah, move to kind of into this like digital sphere, which was of course a necessary step to be taken. And yeah, I think I use my voice to help inform the direction of future education in Ireland. – Intern (4)

Similarly, Intern (7) of the National University of Ireland (NUI) Galway provided an insight into their working experience on several initiatives, while collaborating with other EDTL interns and universities: "I suppose [I experienced] university from another perspective... I hadn't realized all the background work that goes on with this learning". It quickly became evident that collective relationships across institutions among interns, staff, and students could be successfully developed and, furthermore, sustained even under challenging circumstances, such as the pandemic.

Institutional projects

As described previously, each of the EDTL interns played a significant role within their own institution's specific projects. These projects included digital workshops for staff, Microsoft Training programs for students, development of student orientation modules alongside various webinars and social media campaigns to highlight key educational resources and events, primarily focused on both student and staff needs.

Intern experience

Student interns unanimously expressed positive feelings regarding the EDTL experience when answering Q1 during interviews, describing it as "extremely positive", "incredible", and providing opportunities to "massively improve my confidence". Several interns further suggested that they acquired a feeling of contributing in a very positive manner, as they showcased resources and initiatives while also firmly developing relationships within their individual institutions. As previously mentioned, each of the interns had been proactively involved in several significant projects within their higher education institutions. These projects have ranged from workshops, training, and accreditation to developing introductory modular content for new students, and have been solidified alongside the development of institutional partnerships.

Challenges and concerns

In answering Q9 of the interviews, which asked about the challenges that remain in a digital context, interns described the lack of "live" interaction with staff and peers as a particular concern, reflecting on their own experience and those of their peers. Interns describe a lack of engagement and subsequent motivation as students struggled with the tech, the environment, missing that sense of "belonging", a "disconnect", with little "live" or no interaction within a remote context. This seismic shift away from face-to-face to remote learning certainly heralded a disruptive impact on student engagement and learning opportunities as reflected in recent literature (Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020). While recent literature indicates that the design of online learning environments plays a significant role in enhancing learning experiences (Ferrer, Ringer, Saville, Parris, & Kashi, 2020), the EDTL interns also highlight a link to the lack of core baseline digital skills for some students of particular concern, as discussed previously. As intern (3) noted: "I think they got the hang of it, but there were definitely cases of people not being comfortable with the software, and that definitely limits their learning."

In gaining an insight into the choice of pedagogical innovation and digital tools adopted and pedagogical innovation applied to support partnership and collaborative dynamics, for teaching staff, the move to online T&L has presented new possibilities; however, the experience

for some academic staff during the sudden pivot to remote teaching has also led to acute pressures and apprehension (Flynn & Noonan, 2020). As further suggested by student interns, some staff had equally struggled with a 'lack of confidence' with the technology, in a similar fashion to some of their own students.

If they could have formed more of a kind of communities or communities of practice and exchange, they're kind of like, sharing internally as a department, because in all the times it could be scary, becoming part of a webinar, we (EDTL interns) offer webinars, etc., for exactly these reasons, you know we're a big 'think-tank' where people could share their experiences, that was our vision. – Intern (4)

Fully remote teaching and learning, as experienced during the pandemic, has highlighted the issue of *timing* within lectures. Students' experience suggests that too much time is afforded to administrative discussion rather than specific teaching. Interns believe this can be overcome by an initiative that was successfully provided by some academic staff and which students believe should be formally available during the traditional term time. The option for students to engage in online office hours/interactive Q&A sessions with academics has been promoted through the feedback received. As such, the interns believe that these sessions can also address common questions posted on a VLE discussion board.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study, in adopting a students-as-partners approach, was to provide an opportunity to present the unique perspectives of student interns on digital teaching, learning and assessment. Moreover, analysis of the interview data indicates that a strong sense of partnership and collaboration has been developed, enhanced, and sustained across all institutions, particularly under such challenging circumstances. These results corroborate the findings of several previous studies, including Baumber et al. (2020); (Beckingham, 2020; Bovill, 2020; Godbold et al., 2021). Moreover, it is worth noting that the interns gained a compelling "holistic" view of life within a higher education institution as a result of their involvement in the EDTL project. The interviews have further highlighted the particular need for student inclusion in the approved adoption of any new technologies, particularly within a subject-specific context. Specifically concerning T&L, interns suggested the inclusion of Q&A sessions to supplement existing lectures to provide opportunities for academic staff to discuss general administrative issues and subject-specific queries. Furthermore, some interns have requested more tutorials, particularly in a remote online context. The trend towards a more "blended" approach to both remote and face-to-face T&L has been recommended by interns, combining the advantages of face-to-face teaching with elements of online T&L, incorporating a "flipped classroom" approach (Cobo-Rendón, Bruna Jofre, Lobos, Cisternas San Martin, & Guzman, 2022). This finding is consistent with that of earlier research by Mahaye (2020) and others in relation to its enhancement of learning regardless of distance. Following on, interns described the necessity to provide continued flexibility in content delivery developed in response to online learning (Lockee, 2021). The reciprocal empathy experienced by students and academics mitigated the mistakes

and risks taken by staff when teaching online, alongside the vulnerability of students learning to learn online, as reflected by Cutri, Mena, and Whiting (2020). The adoption of clear and concise communications from staff is key for students, alongside the employment of a good balance or mix of assessment types across the term, as previously evaluated in research by Alawamleh, Al-Twait, and Al-Saht (2020). Moreover, the interns suggested a review of the appropriateness of a high-risk assessment, particularly concerning their experiences since March 2020 and reflective findings from recent research by Sam, Reid, and Amin (2020).

Interactions between the EDTL project team and third-level students across all of Ireland culminated in the development of a *Your Education, Your Voice, Your Vision* campaign (April–May, 2021), with the focus on crowd-sourcing the vision for university learning within the context of a post-COVID environment. The campaign was composed of two separate online survey tools: simple polls were scheduled to appear on social media platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, and Facebook ($n=14,000$ respondents), and the full survey with two open-ended questions appeared on Facebook and the EDTL project website ($n=643$ respondents). Dominant responses included a student focus on in-person engagement, interaction with peers and collaboration. A majority (61% of respondents) support having tutorials in person and lectures online, which is consistent with the interns' feedback. Tutorials would often involve a high degree of discussion or debate, and students may find it more comprehensive and engaging in person.

Limitations

The methods adopted within this report are limited in that they are solely confined to answers derived from interviews with EDTL interns ($n=7$) from HE institutions within Ireland.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Several key recommendations emerged from the initial interviews and analysis; these include:

- Define, encourage, and promote a culture of a student-as-partners approach within each HE institution
- Students should be compensated when actively involved in collaborations with staff, as they would otherwise be engaged in part-time work.
- Include students in a pivotal role in the adoption of any new technology within their institution, particularly from a disciplinary perspective
- Provide Q&A sessions in addition to supplemental lectures, and the addition of focused tutorials on the subject matter
- Implement and maximize the benefit of a more interactive 'Blended' approach (asynchronous/synchronous) to T&L within an in-person or remote context
- Provide flexibility in content delivery
- Encourage academic staff to continue with the necessary empathy and consideration for students post-pandemic
- Adopt clear and consistent communication with students
- Continue to provide a good balance or mix of assessment types across the term
- Implement a review of large-scale, high-risk assessments used for examinations
- Implement a review of problematic assessment timetabling across all institutions

CONCLUSION

In this article, the findings provide a unique insight into a *SaP* perspective across both multi-disciplines and HE institutions in Ireland. Within the backdrop of their experiences during the pandemic, student interns have furnished a deeply profound and articulate voice to their individual and collaborative experiences. As such, the interns' feedback contributes and adds value to the ongoing conversation related to successfully employing a student-as-partners model. Key findings clearly indicate how potential student roles can evolve into co-creators and change agents within education (Zarandi, Soares, & Alves, 2022). Moreover, the EDTL project as a whole has played a significant role in empowering interns to successfully address and debate a series of issues with both Academic and Administrative staff of all levels within their own institutions. The implications of these findings are profound. From initially debating technology adoption, assessments, feedback, pedagogical practices, and modes of delivery, this article clearly indicates that, as a consequence, interns' experiences with institutional staff have yielded an overall 'holistic' view and deeper understanding of their own institution's digital teaching and learning strategy and the complexities therein. Moreover, the project has shown to provide inclusive opportunities for interns to additionally discuss and learn from the viewpoint of distinctive strategies developed and reflections from other HE institutions across the country.

In addition, this article further endorses advocating key intern recommendations related to promoting a *SaP* collaborative culture, with clear and consistent communications, with flexibility in the types of assessments developed, and the future adoption of a more 'blended learning' experience for their peers as we transition away from a post-pandemic digital teaching and learning context. Navigating any post-pandemic "snapback", as discussed by Bryant, Phipps, and Lanclos (2023), has focused on the need for both students and educators alike to proactively learn from their experiences of the pandemic within the context of TL&A. In conclusion, our own reflection clearly suggests that this type of partnership adoption has the potential to both further foster engagement and ultimately enhance student experiences as a whole, as part of any future successful, democratic and authentic students-as-partners relationship within Higher Education (Healey & France, 2024).

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APPENDIX A – EDTL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) Tell me about your experience as a student intern, i.e., what it involved? Partnerships? What contributions did you make?
- 2) What types of activities/interactions were used in a digital context to engage students in active learning across the disciplines over the last 12 months? What worked well? What didn't work so well and why?
- 3) When working collaboratively with other students, whether in your role as an intern or as a traditional student, is there anything that you think you missed out on, not meeting face to face when working collaboratively on developing content/material?
- 4) What tools are most frequently used within your institution?
- 5) How would you rate your confidence in using digital technologies and resources to support your learning? (unfamiliar/Competent/Familiar/Very Confident).
- 6) How would you rate the confidence levels of your peers?
- 7) What elements of digital teaching, learning and assessment should be continued and embedded into future programme delivery?
- 8) Can you name any additional technologies you believe could potentially add value to digital teaching, learning and assessment?
- 9) In a digital context, what challenges do you believe remain?
- 10) What do you believe could have been done differently in the last 12 months in relation to digital teaching, learning and assessment?
- 11) In relation to digital teaching, learning and assessment, can you offer one recommendation going forward in the future?