

Leadership Insight

Returning to Education Post Pandemic

by Dr. Eoin Langan

Please provide a brief history of your career.

My career started in trainee accountant roles, with a focus on management accounting, in industry in the late 1980s in London, having commenced my Higher Education journey in what was then Galway RTC, when opportunities for graduates in Ireland were very limited. My career progressed to several management level positions as I passed my professional accountancy exams and became a CIMA member. I travelled a good deal spending 12 months working in Sydney then returning to London via Southeast Asia and transitioned into a career as a SAP consultant. I returned to Ireland in 2000 continuing to work as a SAP consultant/Project Manager. During this time, I spent periods working in the US in both San Francisco and San Diego.

I transitioned into Higher Education in Athlone IT, initially as a Head of Department, then Head of School, and finally as Dean of Faculty of Business & Hospitality. Working in Higher Education rekindled my interest in Education and shortly after joining AIT I completed an MSc IT in Education in TCD and

followed that up with a Doctorate in Education Leadership from DCU.

I joined TU Dublin as Head of School of Accounting and Finance in 2019 bringing my extensive experience from both industry and academia to the role. In September 2021 I was appointed the inaugural Dean of the Faculty of Business in TU Dublin, so there are both interesting and challenging times ahead as we forge the new University.

How has Covid-19 affected the educational system in Ireland and the level of education?

Covid-19 has demonstrated how something unforeseen can have major consequences for how we work and learn. The Higher Education (HE) system showed excellent resilience and agility during the pandemic, with a speedy transition to online learning provision and supports. Many lessons were learned during the pandemic, and there is a lot to reflect on over the coming months.

The HE system was very responsive to the rapidly changing circumstances presented during the pandemic and the

pivot to online and remote delivery of modules greatly assisted students and staff to remain safe while continuing with their learning. It is a testament to the diligence of staff and students that learning continued and programme outcomes were met throughout the pandemic. Programme delivery continued, assessment continued, and students were able to complete their studies and graduate with their qualifications throughout this period. The level of learning and the quality of awards has remained constant throughout the period.

What has been the biggest challenge faced by students/staff in returning to study back on campus/lecture halls?

Students were delighted to return to campus in September. There was great excitement for students meeting their peers and staff for the first time in person. The vibrancy and atmosphere on all HE campuses changes for the better once students are around. All the staff of the University missed having students on campus. The biggest challenges revolved around the need for the safe return for all to the classroom, social distancing, shorter class times and timetable adjustments (to facilitate shorter class times and greater ventilation in lecture halls).

In addition, some pressure arose because of the fact that student orientation and induction events had to be held for all students returning to campus. Students who were progressing into the second year of their studies had no campus experience during their first year in HE due to the pandemic, so they had to be introduced to the premises, the physical facilities and supports, staff and their fellow-class mates. In addition, first year students were commencing their HE journey some two weeks later than in previous



years so their orientation and induction was undertaken when the campus was already busy with returning students.

Most students and staff members were excited and delighted to return to the physical learning environment, but some were concerned about their exposure to Covid-19, particularly those with underlying health conditions or those with caring responsibilities for vulnerable people. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have been as flexible as possible to facilitate as many requests as possible. Also, some students are anxious to maintain some of the flexibility they experienced during the pandemic period. Many have expressed a wish for some of the content to remain on the online environment with more continuous assessment and fewer high stakes final semester examinations, where possible. The experience gained from learning in an online environment has been positive for both staff and students and there is demand to continue with a more blended approach going forward.

Have you seen an increase in a demand for mental health supports since the pandemic hit due to isolation and online learning takes its toll?

There is no doubt that Covid-19 has led to additional mental health challenges for both staff and students. Senior managers have been mindful of this throughout the past 18 months and additional mental health supports have been in place for staff and students. The demand for these supports has remained constant throughout the pandemic period. It has been especially hard for international students being away from family and friends complying with restrictions and having an educational experience far removed from the norm.

A range of additional learning supports, and pastoral care support was made available to all student learners, including part time students for the duration of the pandemic. Feedback from students has been positive on these supports to date.

Other staff supports have also been important, such as employee assistance programmes and informal meetings and celebrations with staff members through online tools such as Zoom or Microsoft

Teams. These measures have been particularly useful for acknowledging contributions of retiring staff members and enabling colleagues and peers to meet and socialise.

Do you think this pandemic has changed and shaped the future of education in Ireland and if so, how?

HEIs have shown great flexibility and resilience in delivering modules online and with greater flexibility than ever before. Content will continue to be available online so that students can prepare for classes and assessments in a more flexible way. Further consultation with stakeholders and research is required to determine the future approach to our delivery modes. There is no doubt that these will influence delivery plans in the future.

The Irish Universities Association (IUA) has undertaken some research on this topic with students and below is an extract of their findings. The full report is available here.

(Source: IUA, 2021)

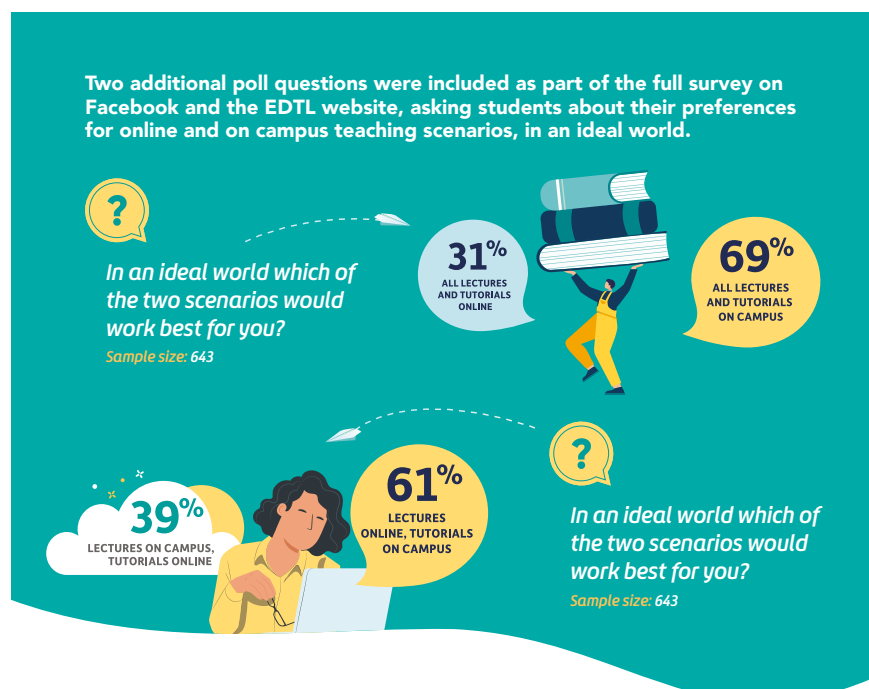
The research findings demonstrate a strong preference for on campus teaching sessions, but a significant percentage (31%) of respondents would prefer everything online. A majority (61% of respondents) support having tutorials in person and lectures online. Tutorials often involve a high degree of discussion or debate, and students may find it more comprehensive and engaging in person.

There is acceptance that deeper learning exists when students participate in class discussions, analysis, debates, tutorial sessions, etc. This interaction will most likely continue in all learning environments – both the physical and the virtual learning environment. Students will likely experience a mix of classroom delivery and virtual delivery on many programmes. It is important we maintain the socialisation aspect of the HE experience and provide growth opportunities for students while integrating the learning from online delivery from the past 18 months.

Also, the move away from traditional end of semester exams towards more continuous and formative assessment models has transformed the student experience over the past two years and this is likely to continue.

With schools and colleges being shut for long periods, the need for digital learning devices and virtual learning platforms cannot be underestimated. What needs to be done to adapt teaching methods and develop resources to make online learning as effective as classroom learning?

The need for digital learning devices and virtual learning platforms was highlighted throughout the pandemic lock down. The virtual learning environment has been a feature of higher education for several years already but extending this to include online delivery is a recent development. A lot of work and effort was made by staff to ensure the online



learning environment was interesting, stimulating and equally effective as classroom learning. Many innovative approaches have been piloted during the lockdown period and some of these approaches will continue to be delivered in the post-pandemic period. Students have been vocal in requesting that some online content will continue to be a part of the curriculum with many seeking a more hybrid model whereby some content is delivered in the traditional classroom environment and other content being delivered in the online environment.

Notwithstanding this, however, I am mindful of the potential for digital poverty (lack of access to devices, internet and skills to engage fully with online learning) and the implications of online learning for student engagement, connection and belonging, so any long-term decisions for online delivery or hybrid delivery models will be given careful consideration as we move forward.

What is the most important lesson that you have learned in your career to date, and what advice would you give to aspiring leaders?

One of the most valuable lessons throughout my career has been to

recognise the importance of teamwork, you can only achieve so much on your own but within a team the level of achievement can be exponential. One of my own favourite quotes is by Helen Keller "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much". Good communication skills are important (especially being a good listener) and being trustworthy – hearing what people are saying and encouraging open and innovative discussion in a 'safe environment' promotes trust, enables everyone to work harder and move towards common goals. Endeavouring to treat people the way you would be like to be treated yourself will keep you on the right path. It's important to recognise that you do not know everything and therefore welcome the interaction of colleagues and encourage discussion and debate.

My advice to aspiring leaders is to be innovative and open to new challenges and opportunities, do not be afraid to ask the 'Why' question a number of times. Be curious and committed to life-long learning, to quote Steven R. Covey "Sharpen the Saw" on a regular basis. Be gentle on yourself.

Have you been able to step away from challenges the last number of months have brought and unwind?

Working from home has presented many challenges especially around managing your time. It is so easy just to go straight from breakfast to dinner and beyond just being in front of your computer going from online meeting to online meeting day after day with no social interaction, as I am sure many of the readers can relate to. I read that chocolate sales increased during lockdown and our house certainly made a contribution to that. Being honest, I really missed the social aspect of being in the office and I look forward to a blended approach in the future.

Thus, it is important to take time for yourself and go outside to get some fresh air. I love getting out and about whatever that is, whether it is some gardening or a walk (needs to be fast) with friends or going for a run or a cycle, you need to get the heart rate up a bit and if you do a small amount regularly you will notice the difference.

I am a strong advocate for balancing work, leisure and family time. It takes a lot of discipline to juggle everything, but I pride myself in being able to step away from work to unwind and enjoy time with my family and friends. I am a believer in a healthy body and mind leads to a healthy person.

