

The Results of the StudentSurvey.ie Trends Over Time Research, 2016-2021.

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Abstract.

Development and implementation of StudentSurvey.ie is driven by the intention to inform, support, and encourage enhancement discussions and activities throughout institutions, and to inform national policy. Nearly 235,000 first and final year undergraduate and taught postgraduate students responded to StudentSurvey.ie between 2016 and 2021. Over this time the national response rate increased to 31%. Part one of the results features six years of student feedback, from 2016 to 2021, using the same set of questions. The use of the same questions every year allows for comparison across the six years to explore change, if any, in students' perception of their experience and engagement with their institution. Part two of the results draws on international results to consider how the results of StudentSurvey.ie from 2016 to 2019 compare with results on the same questions in a broad range of international contexts, including Australia, Chile, China, South Korea, South Africa, UK and the USA and Canada. The unprecedented change brought about by the COVID-19 global crisis cannot be overlooked. Feedback from a national survey over a number of years has enduring value in understanding the experience of students in higher education in Ireland and brings student voices to the heart of national policy and decision-making in Irish higher education.

Keywords: Higher education; Student engagement; Survey.

1. Introduction.

StudentSurvey.ie (Irish Survey of Student Engagement; Suirbhé na hÉireann ar Rannpháirtíocht na Mac Léinn) has become an established feature of the higher education landscape in Ireland since its introduction in 2013. Development and implementation of StudentSurvey.ie is driven by the intention to inform, support, and encourage enhancement discussions and activities throughout institutions, and to inform national policy.

StudentSurvey.ie originated following the publication of the National Strategy for Higher

Education to 2030 (Hunt, 2011) by the (then) Department of Education and Skills (the Ministry) in 2011. This Strategy recommended that higher education institutions put in place systems to capture feedback from students to inform institutional and programme management, as well as national policy. It also recommended that every higher education institution put in place a comprehensive anonymous student feedback system, coupled with structures to ensure that action is taken promptly in relation to student concerns. A partnership was established between the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) in the initial stages of the inception of the survey in 2012. This project team implemented a pilot national student survey called the Irish Survey of Student Engagement in 2013. The national pilot was regarded as successful, leading to full implementation in 2014 onwards (see Drennan et al, 2014, for further detail). The initiative is now managed by a Steering Group, consisting of representatives of these four co-sponsoring organisations (HEA, IUA, THEA and USI), a representative from the statutory quality assurance agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and representatives from the participating institutions.

A significant development achieved in 2018 was the introduction of PGR StudentSurvey.ie (the Irish Survey of Student Engagement for Postgraduate Research Students; see O'Reilly et al, 2018). Students enrolled on programmes leading to research degrees (Masters by Research and PhD) are invited to respond to this discrete question set on a biennial basis.

Early in the process of researching international practice, the project team determined that the focus of the survey should be on student engagement with learning rather than satisfaction. The term '*student engagement*' is used in educational contexts to refer to a range of related, but distinct, understandings of the interaction between students and the higher education institutions they attend (Kuh, 2009, 2001; Trowler, 2010). Accordingly, for the purposes of StudentSurvey.ie, student engagement reflects two key elements. The first is the amount of time and effort that students put into their studies and other educationally beneficial activities. The second is how higher education institutions deploy resources and organise curriculum and other learning opportunities to facilitate and encourage students to participate in activities that are linked to learning. Student engagement with higher education is important to enable them to develop key capabilities such as critical thinking, problem-solving, writing skills, teamwork and communication skills (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kuh, 2001).

To reflect this position, StudentSurvey.ie is based on the National Survey of Student

Engagement (NSSE), an internationally validated, extensively used instrument created in the University of Indiana in 2000. Surveys based on NSSE have been introduced in several countries and the results been incorporated into institutional and sectoral level investigations, including the NSSE Canadian English version (Norrie & Conway, 2014), South Africa Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE; Strydom, Kuh & Mentz, 2010), the Chilean adaptation of NSSE (Zapata, Leihy & Theurillat, 2018), NSSE-China (Guo, Luo, Liu, Shi & Coates, 2019; Luo, Shi, & Tu, 2009), United Kingdom Engagement Survey (UKES; Neves, 2020) and the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE, no longer in use; Gao, Guo & Coates, 2022; Radloff & Coates, 2014; Coates, 2009).

1.1 The value of StudentSurvey.ie for enhancement.

StudentSurvey.ie invites responses from first year undergraduate, final year undergraduate and taught postgraduate students in higher education institutions in Ireland. Participation is encouraged by senior management, faculty and staff, as well as student representatives, with local coordination usually provided by a lead member of staff and national coordination provided by the StudentSurvey.ie Project Manager. The survey responses are securely collected for each of the participating higher education institution by a survey company. The data are anonymised and aggregated to national results. It is these national results that are presented in the annual StudentSurvey.ie National Report and in this paper. The anonymous dataset of responses for each individual institution is returned to that institution for local analysis at the level of institution/ faculty/ school/ college/ department/ learning support unit/ etc.

The comprehensive nature of data gathered is a key strength of the national project. Interpretation of detailed results requires appreciation of the local context. Staff and students within participating institutions are best placed to interrogate their institutional data. Irish higher education institutions have multiple sources of data about their students, of which the StudentSurvey.ie dataset is a valuable component, which are used in varying and increasingly sophisticated ways to identify good practice and plan appropriate enhancement actions. Institutions can use StudentSurvey.ie results as a tool to understand and improve students' experiences and to measure the impact of recent interventions. Institutions are committed to interpreting and utilising StudentSurvey.ie data to enhance students' experiences and do not support the use of student engagement results for any overly simplistic purpose that could be perceived as ranking institutions. Institutional capacity to analyse their StudentSurvey.ie data remains variable across and within the participating higher education institutions.

At a sectoral level, in addition to QQI, StudentSurvey.ie data are used as part of the consultations between the HEA and the institutions which interact with it, and by other stakeholders such as the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, the National Student Engagement Programme, and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science [government ministry]. The data are also used by the representative bodies of the higher education institutions, as well as the institutions themselves. For instance, the data sharing agreement between THEA and the higher education institutions it represents has facilitated sectoral analysis of data by THEA. An example of cross-institutional collaboration is the report using data from PGR StudentSurvey.ie published by the Association of Irish Careers Services (AHECS) Postgraduate Research Students Task Group (Lardner et al, 2020). The StudentSurvey.ie Interim Results Bulletin 2021 (StudentSurvey.ie, 2021a) is an example of where StudentSurvey.ie brought student voices to the heart of national policy and decision-making at a time when the sector was preparing for the 2021/2022 academic year.

Internationally, the StudentSurvey.ie management has participated in a significant international collaboration which will culminate in the publication of Global Student Engagement (Coates, Gao, Guo & Shi, 2022), while the results of PGR StudentSurvey.ie have been reflected in European research and policy (Sursock, Fuller, Michalik & Peterbauer, 2021).

1.2 Higher education in Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the growing threat posed by the spread of COVID-19, all higher education institutions in Ireland were required to restrict access to campus for the majority of staff and students from 12 March 2020 in compliance with nationwide restrictions on movement and begin the pivot to emergency online delivery of teaching and assessment. Public health guidance related to COVID-19 necessitated a move away from the traditional on-campus higher education model towards a remote and blended model, which continued throughout the 2020/2021 academic year. Early evidence which emerged from reports, such as QQI (2020), suggested that the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of students in higher education institutions in Ireland was significant and far-reaching.

The consideration of the experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic offers the opportunity to learn from the experience. Institutions can be more informed about the aspects of the online/ blended experience which could be retained,

and to reflect on the practices which require change. It also offers institutions feedback on what the most pressing collective needs are for students across the country and across the range of student types, which should inform their decisions about how to respond to those needs. As institutions and students' unions work together over the coming years, the feedback from the 2021 survey will serve as a crucial reminder of what is most valued by their students and what should therefore be retained under new approaches to delivery. It should also serve as a powerful measure of the national student experience of taught and research students during the COVID-19 pandemic and inform local and national efforts to minimise the negative impacts on students.

2. Aims of the research.

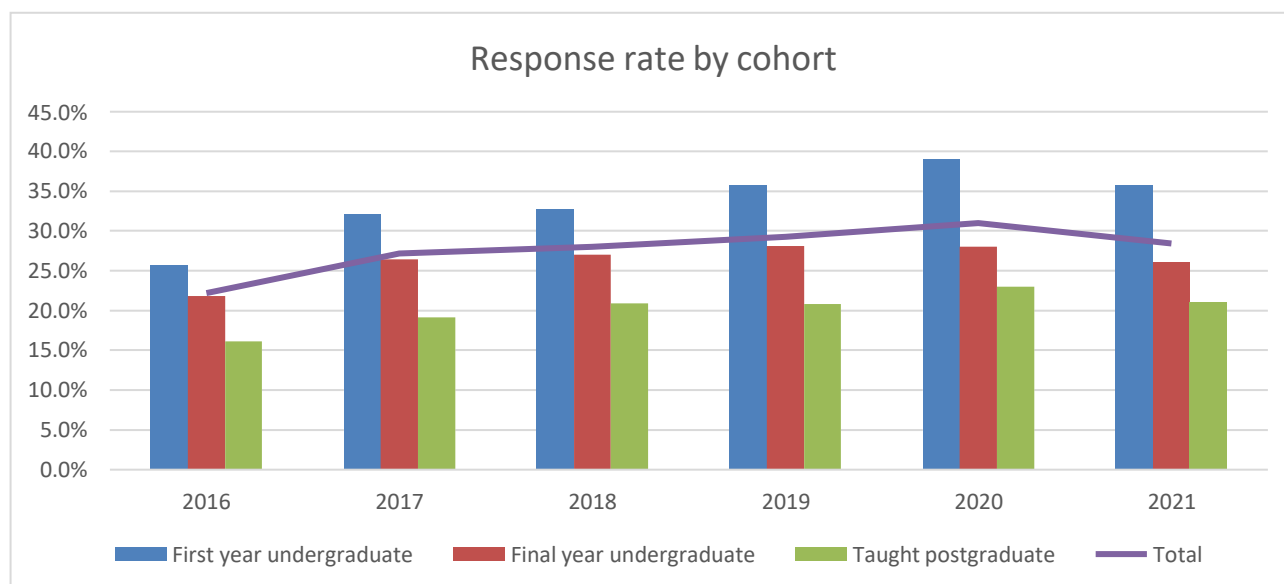
The aims of this research are:

1. To provide insights into the progress of student engagement from 2016 to 2021 from the presentation of quantitative data over the six years.
2. To provide participating higher education institutions with a national benchmark against which to compare their own results.
3. To provide participating higher education institutions with international context against which they may reflect on their own results.

3. Results.

3.1 Demographic information.

A total of 232,450 students responded to StudentSurvey.ie between 2016 and 2021, 43,791 students of which responded in 2021 alone. The respondents consisted of 113,057 first year undergraduate students, 78,222 final year undergraduate students, and 41,171 taught postgraduate students. Over this time the national response rate increased from 22.2% to a high of 31% in 2020, though it fell slightly to 28.4% in 2021. The profile of the StudentSurvey.ie respondents has closely matched the national student population profile over these years, as shown in more detail in the StudentSurvey.ie National Reports (StudentSurvey.ie, 2021b). All results presented in this research have been weighted by gender, mode of study and cohort within a given year.

Figure 1: Response rate by cohort 2016-2021.

3.2 National results by indicator and question.

The results presented here are from six years of student feedback, from 2016 to 2021, using the same set of questions. The indicator scores for each indicator are calculated from responses to multiple questions that relate to that indicator. For each indicator discussed below, the questions which contribute to that indicator, as well as the response scoring, are first presented.

3.3 Interpreting indicator scores.

The indicator scores for each indicator are calculated from responses to multiple questions that relate to that indicator. Indicator scores are not percentages but rather represent relative performance. They are calculated scores to enable interpretation of the data at a higher level than individual questions, i.e., to act as signposts to help the reader to navigate the large data set. Responses to questions are converted to a 60-point scale, with the lowest response placed at 0 and the highest response placed at 60. Indicator scores are calculated for a respondent when they answer all or almost all related questions. Indicator scores cannot be compared across indicators or combined to create an overall indicator score in any meaningful or statistically sound way.

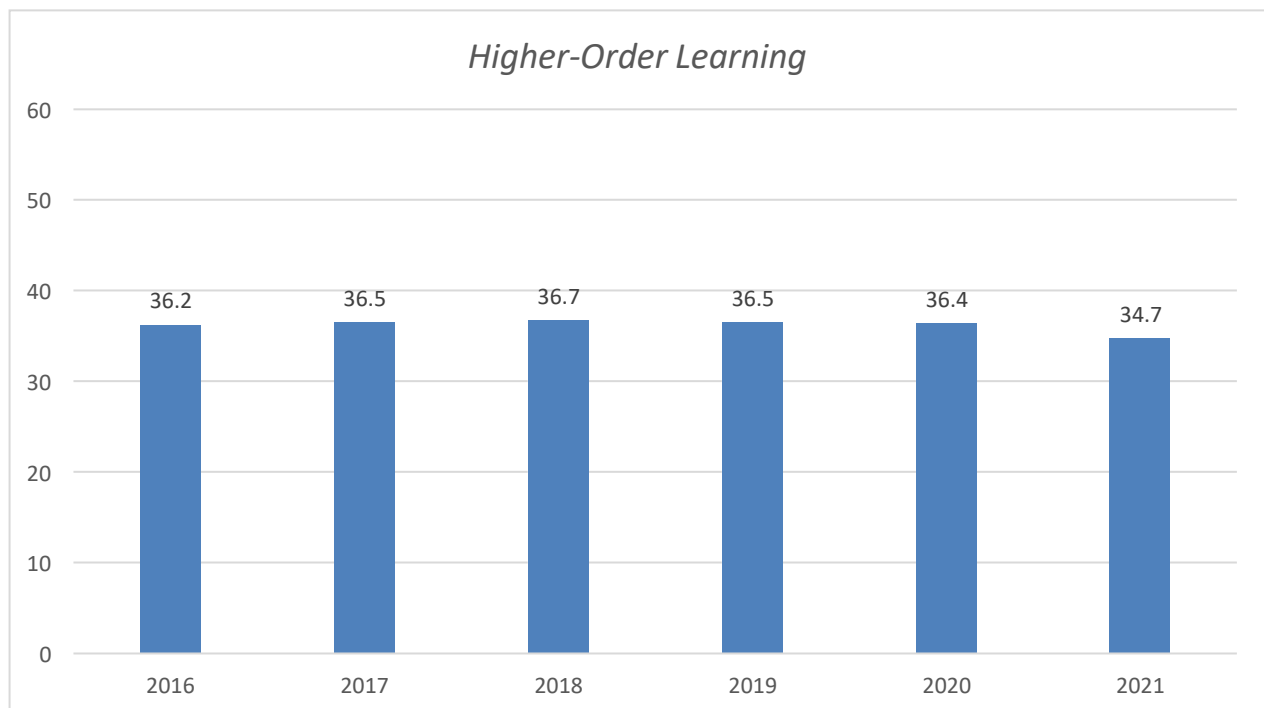
3.3.1 Higher-Order Learning.

The *Higher-Order Learning* indicator consists of the following four questions, following the stem “During the current academic year, how much has your coursework emphasised...”:

- Applying facts, theories, or methods to practical problems or new situations
- Analysing an idea, experience, or line of reasoning in depth by examining its parts
- Evaluating a point of view, decision, or information source
- Forming an understanding or new idea from various pieces of information

Students are asked to rate these questions on a scale from 1 to 4, with 1 meaning Very Little and 4 meaning Very Much.

Figure 2: *Higher-Order Learning* indicator scores 2016-2021.



The national average indicator score for *Higher-Order Learning* has stayed largely the same from 2016 to 2020, though there was a peak in 2018. However, the national average indicator score for *Higher-Order Learning* in 2021 was significantly lower than all other years. This difference was least pronounced compared to 2016 (effect size = .103; $p < .001$; small) and

most pronounced compared to 2018 (effect size = .143; $p < .001$; small).

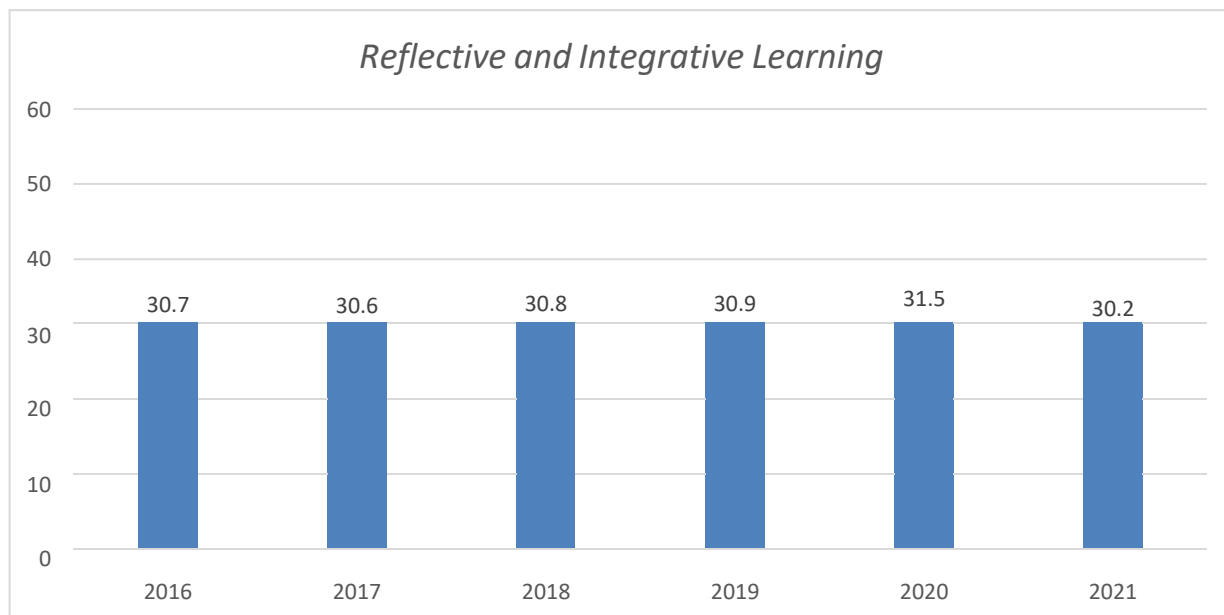
3.3.2 Reflective and Integrative Learning.

The *Reflective and Integrative Learning* indicator consists of the following seven questions, following the stem “*During the current academic year, about how much have you...*”:

- Combined ideas from different subjects/modules when completing assignments
- Connected your learning to problems or issues in society
- Included diverse perspectives (political, religious, racial/ethnic, gender, etc.) in discussions or assignments
- Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue
- Tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from their perspective
- Learned something that changed the way you understand an issue or concept?
- Connected ideas from your subjects / modules to your prior experiences and knowledge

Students are asked to rate these questions on a scale from 1 to 4, with 1 meaning Never and 4 meaning Very Often.

Figure 3: Reflective and Integrative Learning indicator scores 2016-2021.



The national average indicator score for *Reflective and Integrative Learning* has increased from 2016 to 2020. However, the national average indicator score for *Reflective and Integrative Learning* in 2021 was significantly lower than all other years. This difference was least pronounced compared to 2017 (effect size = .034; $p < .001$; very small) and most pronounced compared to 2020 (effect size = .120; $p < .001$; small).

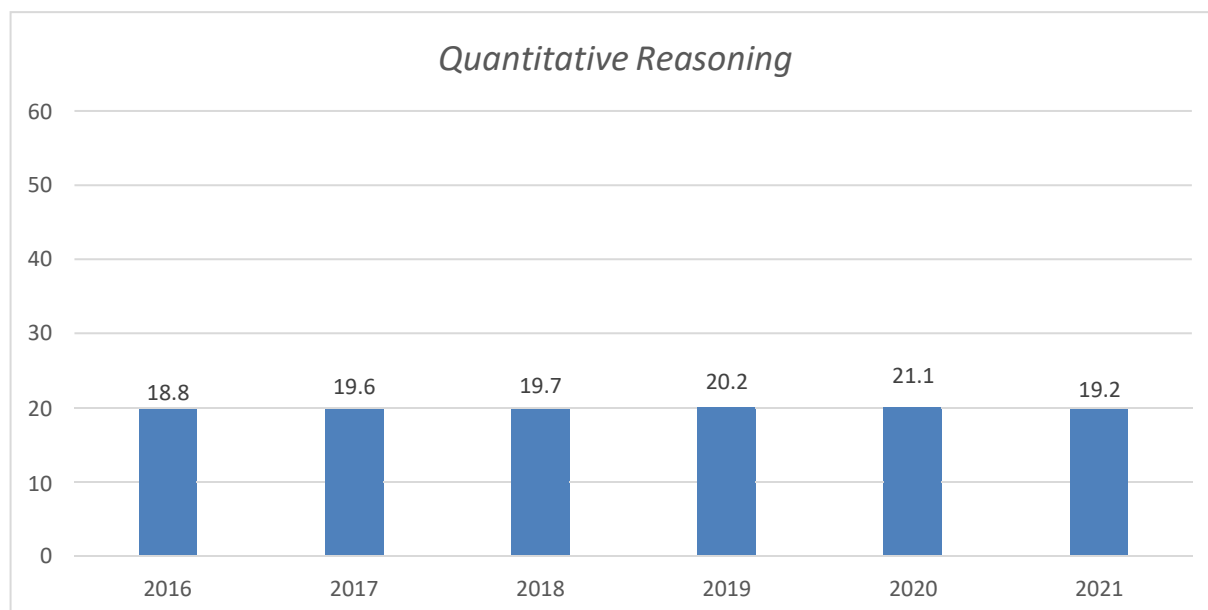
3.3.3 Quantitative Reasoning.

The *Quantitative Reasoning* indicator consists of the following three questions, following the stem “*During the current academic year, about how much have you...*”:

- Reached conclusions based on your analysis of numerical information (numbers, graphs, statistics, etc.)
- Used numerical information to examine a real-world problem or issue (unemployment, climate change, public health, etc.)
- Evaluated what others have concluded from numerical information

Students are asked to rate these questions on a scale from 1 to 4, with 1 meaning Never and 4 meaning Very Often.

Figure 4: Quantitative Reasoning indicator scores 2016-2021.



The national average indicator score for *Quantitative Reasoning* has increased from 2016 to 2021. The national average indicator score for *Quantitative Reasoning* in 2021 was significantly higher than 2016 (effect size = .029; $p < .001$; very small). However, the national average score in 2021 was significantly lower than all other years examined. This difference was least pronounced compared to 2017 (effect size = .028; $p < .001$; very small) and most pronounced compared to 2020 (effect size = .128; $p < .001$; small).

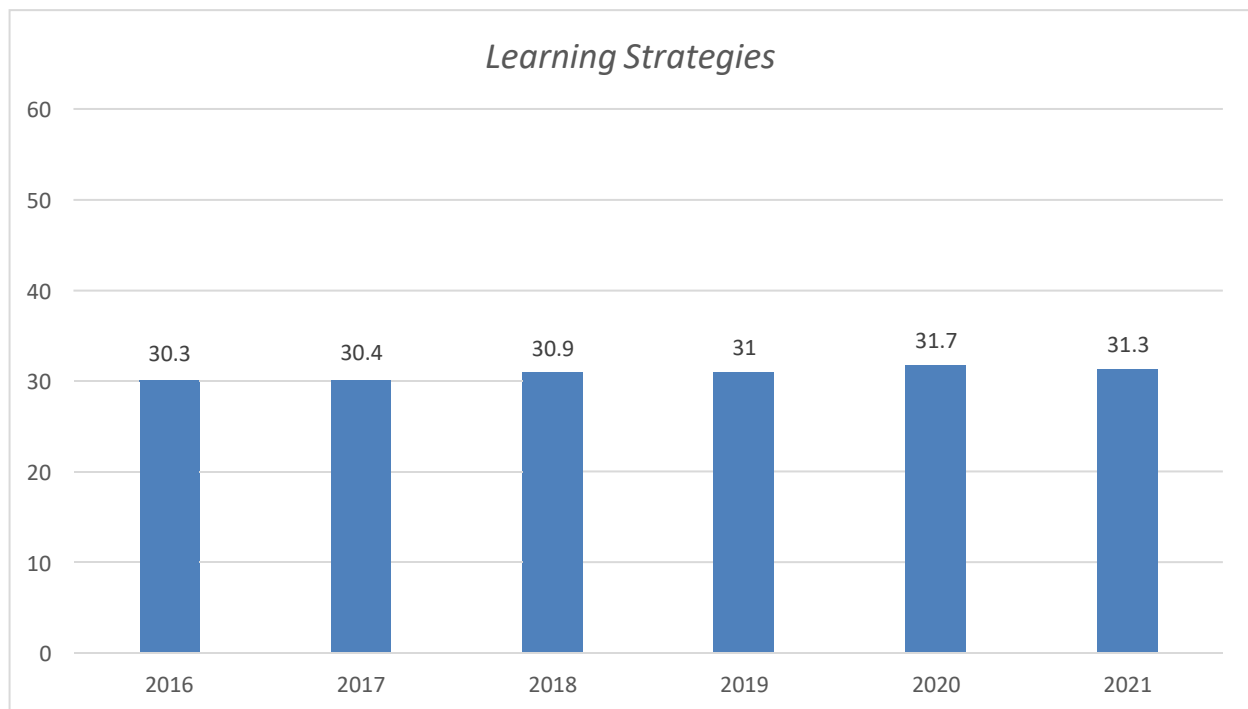
3.3.4 Learning Strategies.

The *Learning Strategies* indicator consists of the following three questions, following the stem “During the current academic year, about how much have you...”:

- Identified key information from recommended reading materials
- Reviewed your notes after class
- Summarised what you learned in class or from course materials

Students are asked to rate these questions on a scale from 1 to 4, with 1 meaning Never and 4 meaning Very Often.

Figure 5: Learning Strategies indicator scores 2016-2021.



The national average indicator score for *Learning Strategies* has increased from 2016 to 2021. The national average indicator score for *Learning Strategies* in 2021 was significantly higher than 2016 (effect size = .029; $p < .001$; very small), 2017 (effect size = .068; $p < .001$; very small), 2018 (effect size = .030; $p < .001$; very small) and 2019 (effect size = .025; $p < .001$; very small). While the national average score in 2021 was significantly lower than 2020, the effect size was very small (effect size = .028; $p < .001$).

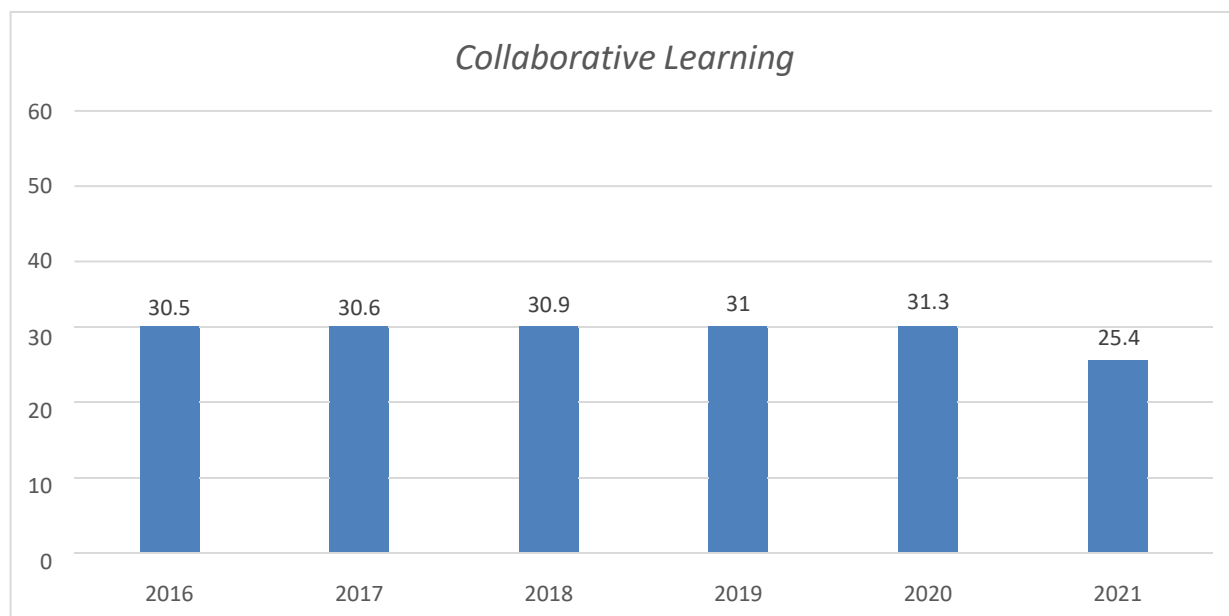
3.3.5 Collaborative Learning.

The *Collaborative Learning* indicator consists of the following four questions, following the stem “During the current academic year, about how much have you...”:

- Asked another student to help you understand course material
- Explained course material to one or more students
- Prepared for exams by discussing or working through course material with other students.
- Worked with other students on projects or assignments

Students are asked to rate these questions on a scale from 1 to 4, with 1 meaning Never and 4 meaning Very Often.

Figure 6: Collaborative Learning indicator scores 2016-2021.



The national average indicator score for *Collaborative Learning* increased steadily from 2016 to 2020. However, the national average indicator score for *Collaborative Learning* in 2021 was significantly lower than all other years. This difference was least pronounced compared to 2016 (effect size = .369; $p < .001$) and most pronounced compared to 2020 (effect size = .427; $p < .001$).

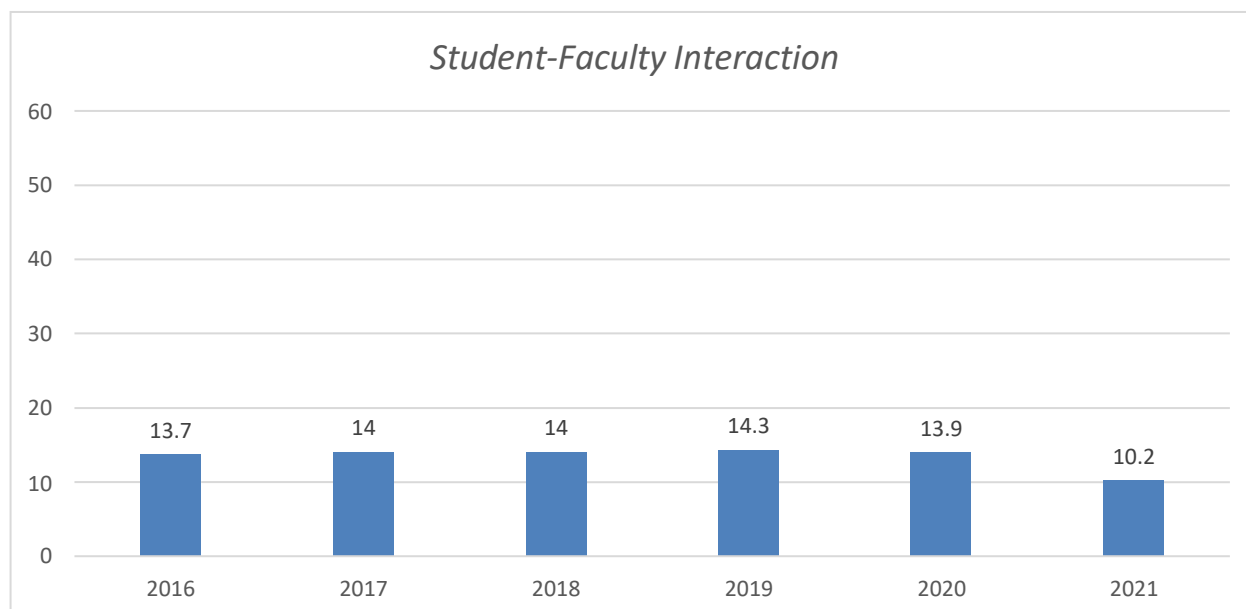
3.3.6 Student- Faculty Interaction.

The *Student-Faculty Interaction* indicator consists of the following four questions, following the stem “*During the current academic year, about how much have you...*”:

- Talked about career goals with academic staff.
- Worked with academic staff on activities other than coursework (committees, student groups, etc.)
- Discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with academic staff outside of class
- Discussed your performance with academic staff.

Students are asked to rate these questions on a scale from 1 to 4, with 1 meaning Never and 4 meaning Very Often.

Figure 7: Student-Faculty Interaction indicator scores 2016-2021.



The national average indicator score for *Student-Faculty Interaction* increased from 2016 to 2020, though it peaked in 2019. Again, the national average indicator score for *Student-Faculty Interaction* in 2021 was significantly lower than all other years. This difference was least pronounced compared to 2016 (effect size = .3; $p < .001$) and most pronounced compared to 2019 (effect size = .342; $p < .001$).

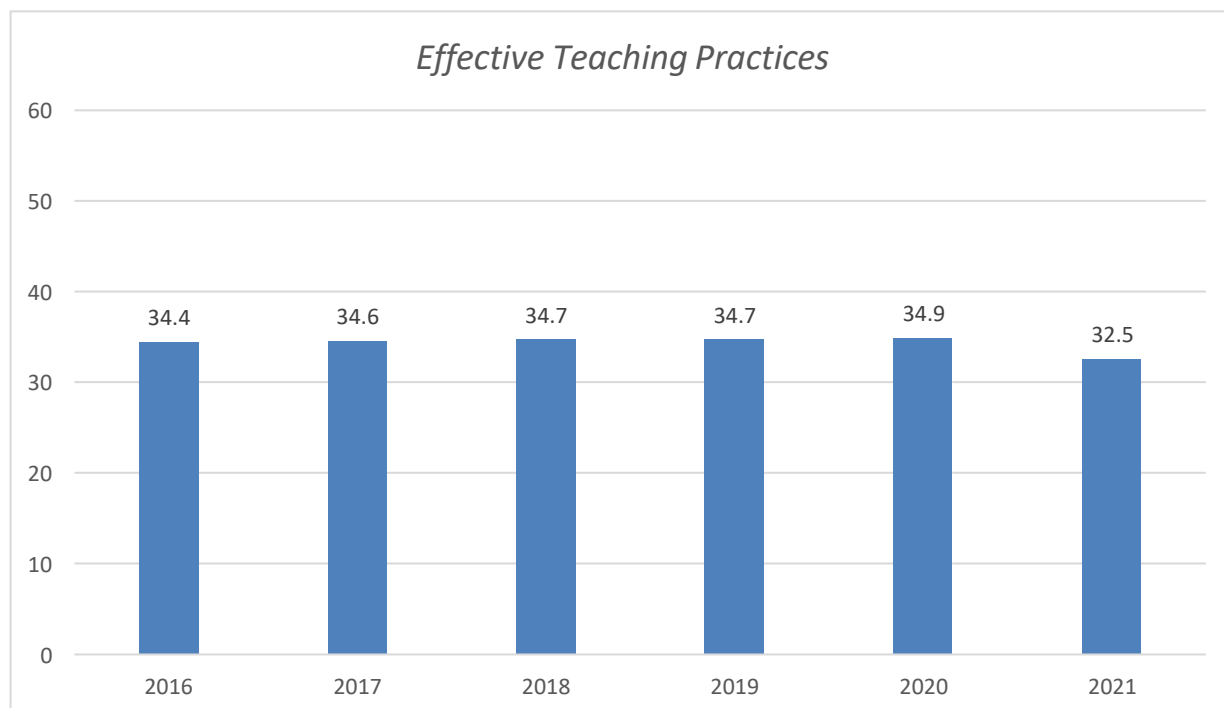
3.3.7 Effective Teaching Practices.

The *Effective Teaching Practices* indicator consists of the following five questions, following the stem “*During the current academic year, to what extent have lecturers/ teaching staff.....*”:

- Clearly explained course goals and requirements
- Taught in an organised way
- Used examples or illustrations to explain difficult points
- Provided feedback on draft work in progress
- Provided prompt and detailed feedback on tests or completed assignments

Students are asked to rate these questions on a scale from 1 to 4, with 1 meaning Very Little and 4 meaning Very Much.

Figure 8: *Effective Teaching Practices* indicator scores 2016-2021.



The national average indicator score for *Effective Teaching Practices* has increased slightly from 2016 to 2021. However, the national average indicator score for *Effective Teaching Practices* in 2021 was significantly lower than all other years. This difference was least pronounced compared to 2016 (effect size = .134; $p < .001$) and most pronounced compared to 2020 (effect size = .174; $p < .001$).

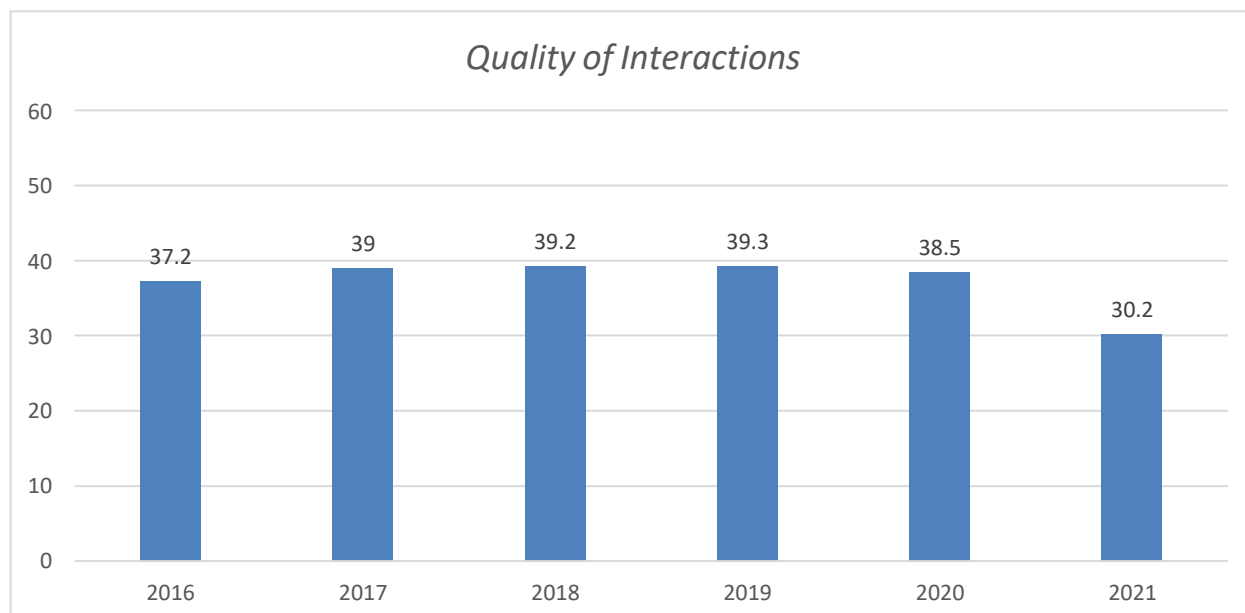
3.3.8 Quality of Interactions.

The *Quality of Interactions* Indicator consists of the following five questions, following the stem “At your institution, please indicate the quality of interactions with.....”:

- Students
- Academic Advisors
- Academic Staff
- Support services staff (career services, student activities, accommodation, etc.)
- Other administrative staff and offices (registry, finance, etc.)

Students are asked to rate these questions on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 meaning Poor and 7 meaning Excellent.

Figure 9: *Quality of Interactions* indicator scores 2016-2021.



Overall, there was an increase in the national average indicator score for *Quality of Interactions* from 2016 to 2020, though it peaked in 2019. The national average indicator score for *Quality of Interactions* in 2021 was significantly lower than all other years. This difference was least pronounced in 2016 (effect size = .488; $p < .001$) and most pronounced in 2019 (effect size = .644; $p < .001$).

3.3.9 *Supportive Environment*.

The *Supportive Environment* indicator consists of the following eight questions, following the stem “*How much does your institution emphasise*”:

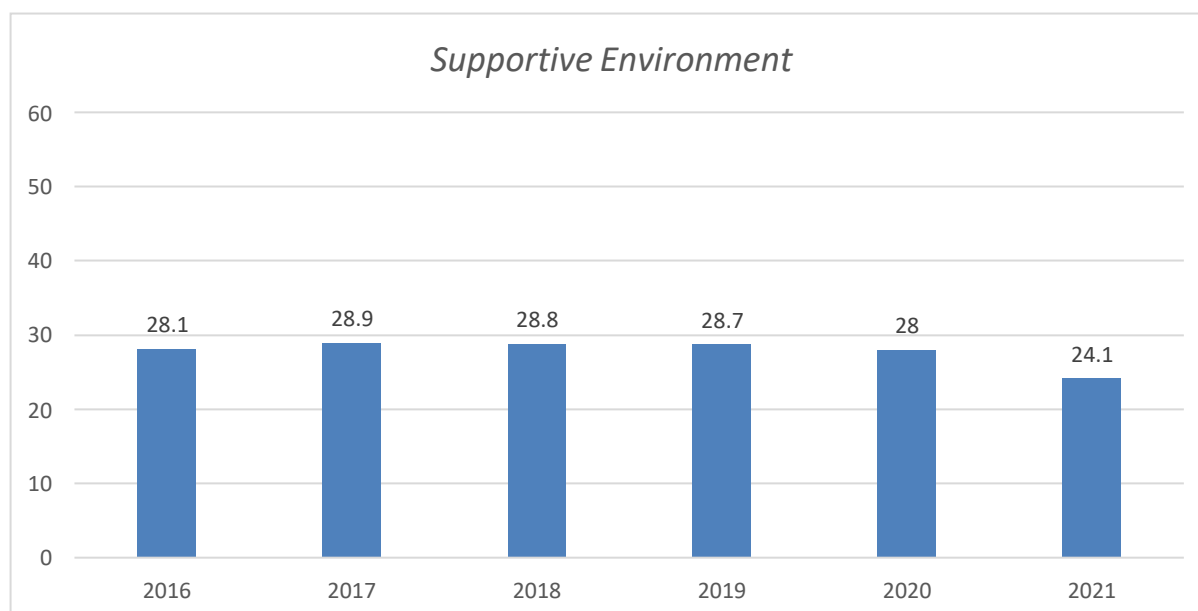
- Providing support to help students succeed academically
- Using learning support services (learning centre, computer centre, maths support, writing support etc.)
- Contact among students from different backgrounds (social, racial/ethnic, religious, etc.)
- Providing opportunities to be involved socially
- Providing support for your overall well-being (recreation, health care, counselling,

etc.)

- Helping you manage your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)
- Attending campus activities and events (special speakers, cultural performances, sporting events, etc.)
- Attending events that address important social, economic, or political issues

Students are asked to rate these questions on a scale from 1 to 4, with 1 meaning Very Little and 4 meaning Very Much.

Figure 10: *Supportive Environment* indicator scores 2016-2021.



The national average indicator score for *Supportive Environment* has stayed largely the same from 2016 to 2020, though there was an increase from 2017-2019, which eased off again in 2020. However, the national average indicator score for *Supportive Environment* in 2021 was significantly lower than all other years. This difference was least pronounced in 2020 (effect size = .28; $p < .001$) and most pronounced in 2017 (effect size = .35; $p < .001$). This could be the indicator most immediately affected by the impact of COVID-19, even for higher education institutions which were still open when the data for 2020 were being collected but were already starting to curtail their opportunities for civic and social gatherings¹.

¹ The data for StudentSurvey.ie 2020 were collected in February and March 2020, before COVID-19 restrictions were put in place for all but five of the participating higher education institutions.

3.4 Comparison with international results.

This part of the paper draws on international results to consider how the results of StudentSurvey.ie from 2016 to 2019 compare with results on the same questions in a broad range of international contexts. Ireland is not the only country to have adapted the NSSE survey. This paper includes comparisons of Irish results with results from surveys conducted in Australia², Chile, China, South Korea, South Africa, UK and the USA and Canada, all areas which have adapted the NSSE survey and use it extensively. These data have been shared by the editors of Global Student Engagement (Coates et al., 2022), which examines student engagement activities in a number of jurisdictions, including a chapter on the Irish context (Nic Fhlannchadha, Lau & Stanley, 2022). One of the chapters examines results from a specific set of questions from the NSSE survey shared across jurisdictions. A subset of these results is presented in this section.

There are limitations to how closely StudentSurvey.ie results can be compared to results of different surveys of student experience being operated in diverse higher education contexts worldwide, even when the questions appear similar. This paper avoids making a direct comparison between the results of StudentSurvey.ie and the National Student Survey (NSS) which runs annually in the UK. The NSS has generally been seen as a survey of student “*satisfaction*”, and in recent years has seen its validity called into question because it has been implicated in the driving down of standards and grade inflation (UK Department of Education, 2020). Despite the proximity of Ireland to the UK, and the similarities between the higher education systems, the two surveys are quite different, in terms of purpose, questions, and how the results are used. The results of the NSS are used for institutional benchmarking, which contributed to the suggestion that institutions were overemphasising the final question (relating to overall satisfaction) instead of recognising issues which required remedial action. This led to the decision not to include a comparison of the results of StudentSurvey.ie and the NSS in this paper.

3.5 Key change to note.

The results are presented as a mean score for responses to the individual questions. The mean

² The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) (Coates, 2009) was discontinued in 2013, and many overlapping questions are now asked in the Student Experience Survey (SES) (Radloff, Coates, Taylor, James, & Krause, 2013; Radloff, Coates, James, & Krause, 2012).

scores are calculated as follows:

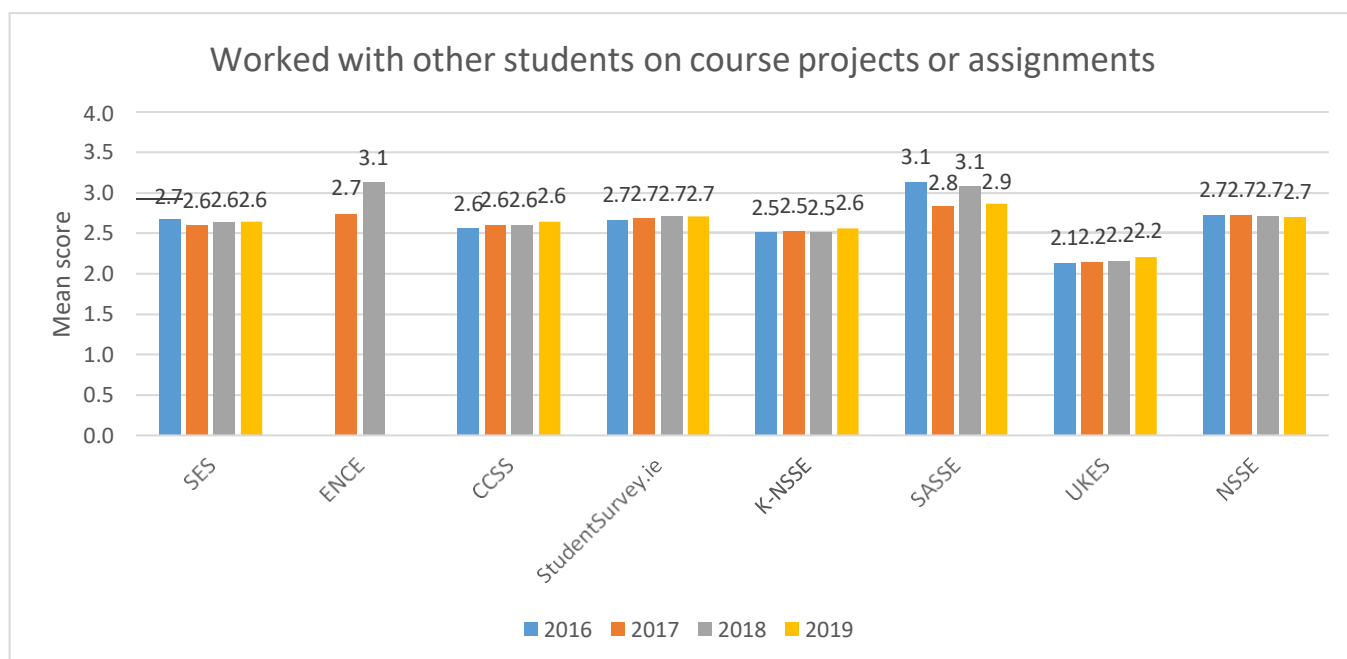
1. Each individual student's response option is given a score. For example: Very Little = 1, Some = 2, Quite A Bit = 3, Very Much = 4.
2. The mean score for a group of students, for example all students in Ireland, is calculated by adding all of the individual scores (ranging from 1 to 4) together and dividing by the number of students to calculate a mean score.

The first question considered is one which contributes to *Collaborative Learning*, and asks students to consider:

During the current academic year, about how often have you worked with other students on course projects or assignments?

The available results for surveys conducted with selected institutions in Australia (now collected via the SES), Chile (ENCE), China (CCSS), Ireland (StudentSurvey.ie), South Korea (K-NSSE), South Africa (SASSE), the UK (UKES) and the USA and Canada (NSSE) are presented below.

Figure 11: International comparator results for “worked with other students on course projects or assignments” for 2016-2019 (from Coates & Gao (2022)).



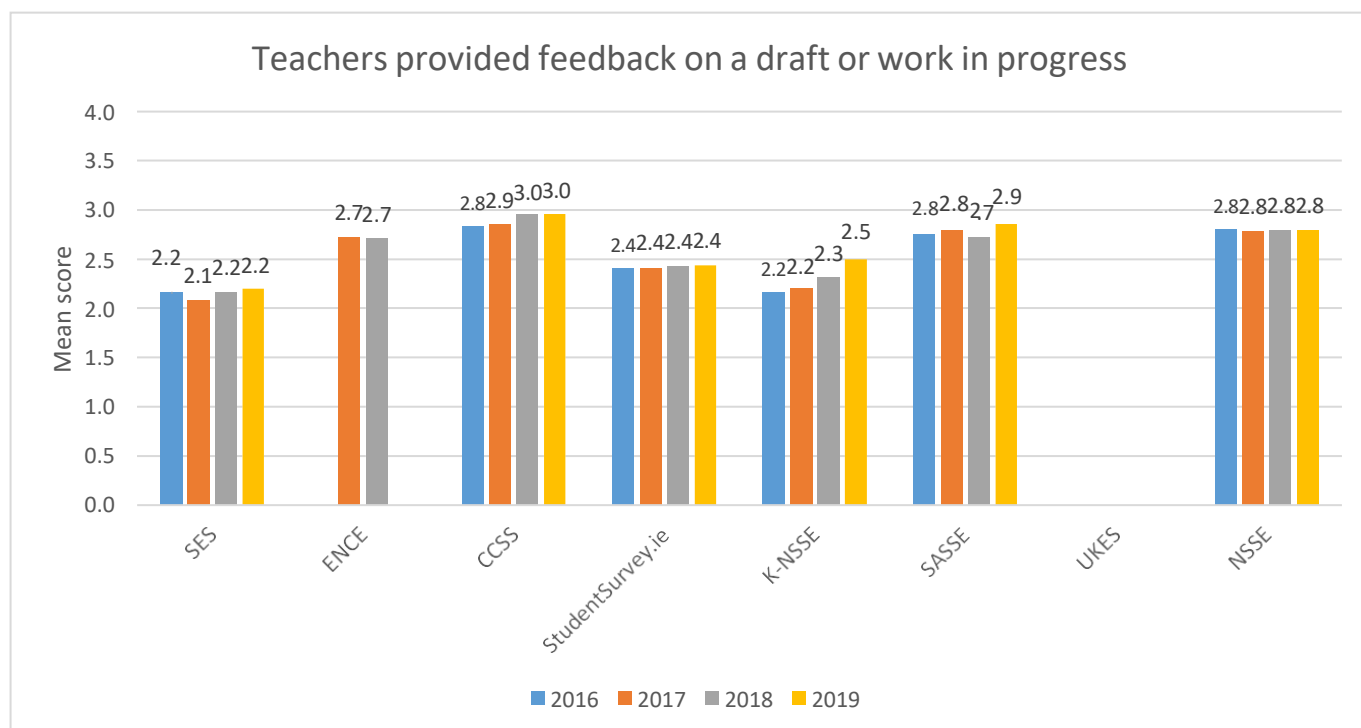
The examination of high-level results for other surveys does not give us the detailed insights into the experiences of students that examination of the detailed national results gives us. However, it does give international context to those national results, which is illuminating in its own right. Looking first to change over time, and first looking to the scores for respondents in Ireland, the mean score for this question did not change from 2016 to 2019 and stayed constant at 2.7. The scores for this question remained constant (or changed by only 0.1 points) for respondents in Australia (2.7-2.6), China (2.6), in South Korea (2.5-2.6), in the UK (2.1-2.2) and in USA and Canada (2.7). In the context of these surveys, it becomes less surprising that the mean score for respondents in Ireland did not change from 2016 to 2019, and it is very closely aligned with scores in Australia, China, South Korea and USA and Canada, while appearing to be somewhat higher than the mean score for respondents in the UK. It is noted that the scores for the survey conducted in Chile appear to have changed substantially from 2017 to 2018 (though this cannot be tested with statistical analyses in the absence of raw data), and the scores for students in South Africa also appear to vary substantially across 2016 to 2019.

The next question considered is one which contributes to *Effective Teaching Practices*:

During the current school year, to what extent have your instructors provided feedback on a

draft or work in progress?

Figure 12: International comparator results for “teachers provided feedback on a draft or work in progress” for 2016-2019 (from Coates & Gao (2022)).

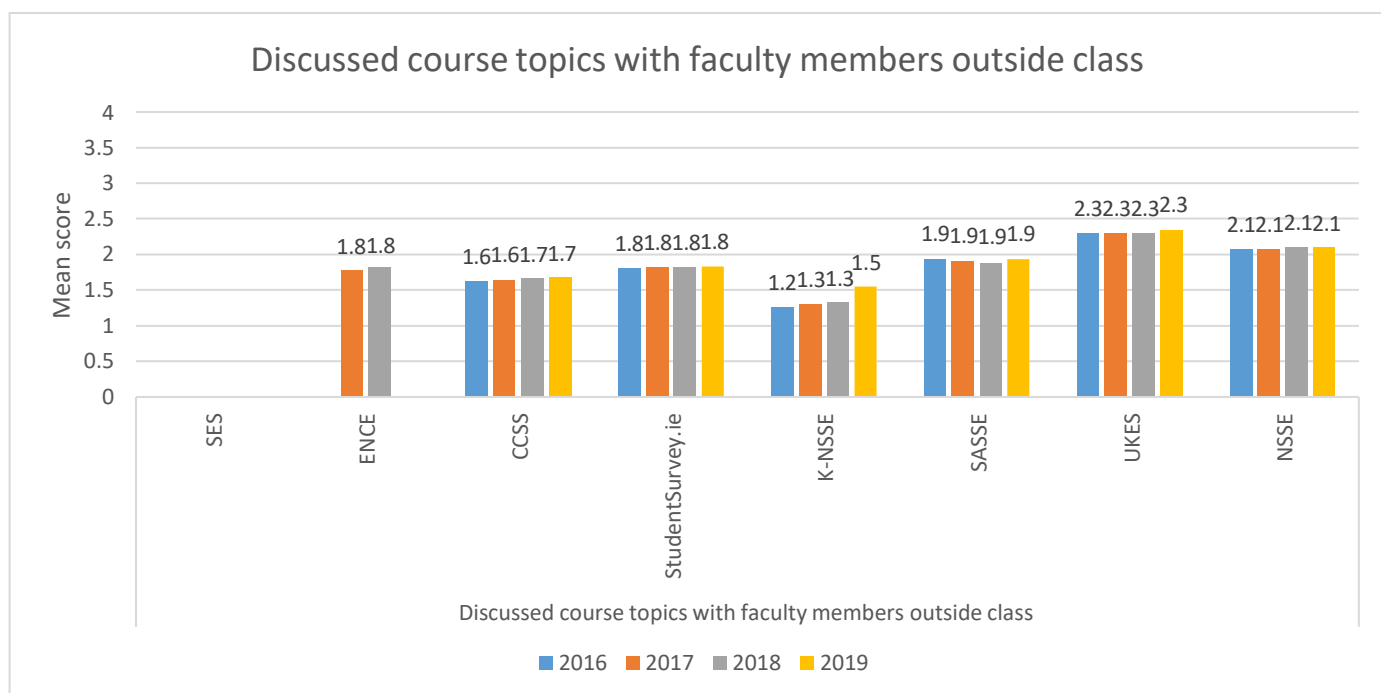


The mean score for Ireland did not change from 2016 to 2019 and stayed constant at 2.4. A similarly constant result can be seen for Australia (2.2-2.1), Chile (2.7) and USA and Canada (2.8), with the mean score for respondents in Australia appearing to be lower than respondents in Ireland, and the mean score for respondents in Chile and in the USA and Canada appearing to be higher than respondents in Ireland. The mean score for respondents in China appears to have increased from 2016 (2.8) to 2019 (3.0), as did the mean score for respondents in South Korea (2.2-2.5). The score for mean score for respondents in South Africa increased from 2016 (2.8) to (2.9) but there was a decrease to a low of 2.7 in 2018. Overall, the range of changes from 2016 to 2019 appears to be quite narrow when change did occur. The mean score for respondents in Ireland appears to fall around the middle of the range of scores, with Australia and South Korea appearing to have lower scores (around 2.2 for most years) and Chile, China, South Africa and USA and Canada appearing to have higher scores (around 2.8 for most years).

The next question considered is one which contributes to *Student-Faculty Interaction*:

During the current academic year, about how often have you discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with a faculty member outside of class?

Figure 13: International comparator results for “discussed course topics with faculty members outside class” for 2016-2019 (from Coates & Gao (2022)).



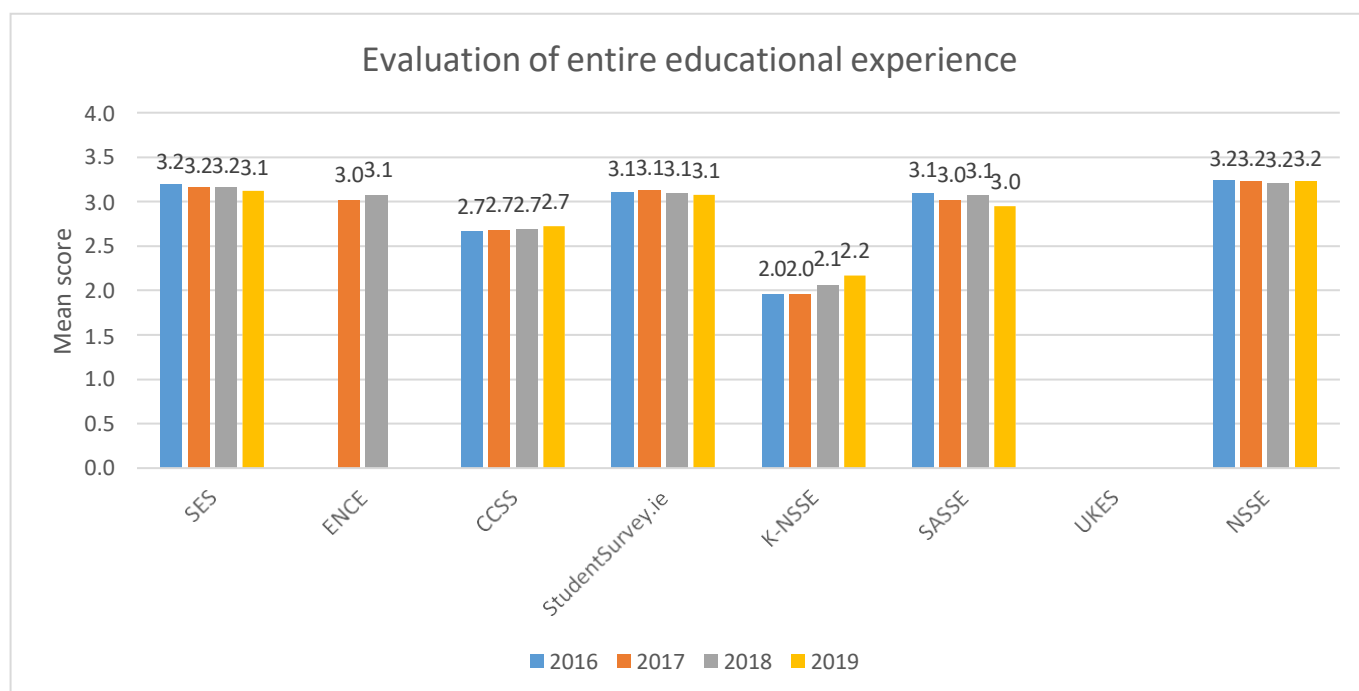
In isolation, the constant mean score for respondents in Ireland of 1.8 for 2016 to 2019 could be cause of concern, as it is lower than scores for other questions, such as the two questions presented above. While this may be the case, and individual institutions may wish to prioritise increasing the amount of time students spend discussing topics, ideas, or concepts with a faculty member outside of class, considering these results alongside other countries is illuminating. Looking first to change over time, the mean score for this question remained constant (or changed by only 0.1 points) in Chile (1.8), China (1.6-1.7), South Africa (1.9), the UK (2.3) and USA and Canada (2.1). Only respondents in South Korea appear to have changed in their response to this question, whereby the mean score increased from 1.2 in 2016 to 1.5 in 2019. In the context of these countries, it becomes less surprising that the mean score for respondents in Ireland did not change from 2016 to 2019. Furthermore, mean score for respondents in Ireland appears to fall around the middle of the range of scores, with China and South Korea appearing to have lower scores, Chile and South Africa scoring around the same,

and UK and USA and Canada appearing to have higher scores.

The final question considered is one which does not contribute to any StudentSurvey.ie indicator. It requires students to consider their overall experience of the academic year to date:

How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?

Figure 14: International comparator results for “evaluation of entire educational experience” for 2016-2019 (from Coates & Gao (2022)).



The results for this question should be interpreted with caution. Students' concept of poor, fair, good or excellent in the context of their entire educational experience at their institution is likely to vary considerably across and within countries, and be impacted by students' expectations, the academic and societal culture(s) the students are operating within, and student characteristics like gender, ethnicity, age, socio-economic and socio-cultural status, and any number of other factors which may come to bear on how students answer this question. Bearing those caveats in mind, firstly looking at the results over time, responses from students across all surveys appeared to be relatively constant from 2016 to 2019, including those data collections in Australia (3.2-3.1), Chile (3.0-3.1), China (2.7), Ireland (3.1), South Korea (2.0-2.2), South Africa (3.1-3.0) and USA and Canada (3.2). Secondly, the results appear to be the

most similar across all surveys of all the questions included. Respondents participating in the Irish survey appeared to score very similarly on this question to respondents in Australia, Chile, South Africa and USA and Canada.

4. Discussion.

Nearly 235,000 students responded to StudentSurvey.ie between 2016 and 2021, and the profile of respondents has closely matched the national student population profile over these years. The national average indicator scores for *Higher-Order Learning*, *Reflective and Integrative Learning*, *Student-Faculty Interaction*, *Quality of Interactions* and *Supportive Environment* increased from 2016 to 2020 with varying peaks within this time period. The national average indicator score for *Quantitative Reasoning*, *Learning Strategies*, *Collaborative Learning* and *Effective Teaching Practices* increased steadily from 2016 to 2020. In 2021, scores for all indicators were negatively impacted by COVID-19, though some such as *Learning Strategies* only slightly, and others such as *Quality of Interactions* more significantly.

StudentSurvey.ie is rooted in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The current research includes comparisons of Irish results with results from Australia, Chile, China, South Korea, South Africa, UK and the USA and Canada. The mean scores for each country used to make these comparisons are drawn from Coates et al. (2022). In the absence of the raw data, the scope for statistical analyses was limited and the analysis was contained to examination of differences in the descriptive results. Nevertheless, this examination of high-level results for other countries provides international context to the national results for Ireland, which was valuable. In the context of these countries, it became less surprising that the mean score for respondents in Ireland for some questions examined did not change from 2016 to 2019. Several other countries with reasonably comparable higher education systems (with regard to the experience of students) also showed steady scores for these questions over the same timeframe. The mean scores for respondents in Ireland appeared to fall around the middle of the range, and the results did not align with any single country examined. While the results give reliable international context to the results of StudentSurvey.ie, further analysis at a more granular level, substantiated by a deeper knowledge of the factors contributing to the scores in the individual countries, is needed before further conclusions can be drawn.

Furthermore, consideration of the international comparator data was limited to examination of the descriptive results due to the available data being limited to mean scores for each county in

a given year and this is acknowledged as a limitation of the present research. Furthermore, the data were for all students, regardless of stage of study or mode of study. Finally, there were some gaps in the collated data because not all countries used all of the questions deemed viable for comparison.

The unprecedented change brought about by the COVID-19 global crisis cannot be overlooked. In addition to the results presented in this paper, Nic Fhlannchadha, Lau and Stanley (2022) present an examination of the results of questions included in StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie 2021 designed to examine the impact of COVID-19 on students (see also StudentSurvey.ie, 2021a; 2021b, 2021c). Their results align closely with the results of the IUA Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning (2021) report "*Your Education, Your Voice, Your Vision*". Public health guidance related to COVID-19 has necessitated a move away from the traditional on-campus higher education model towards a remote and blended/ hybrid model in the 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 academic years. Such changes may be short-lived, or they may change how higher education operates in the long-term. In either case, feedback from a national survey over a number of years has enduring value in understanding the experience of students in higher education in Ireland.

For instance, investigating the experiences of internationally domiciled and Irish domiciled students in this context is essential to ensuring students continue to be offered the best experience possible. Nic Fhlannchadha, Trench Bowles and Frawley (2021) investigated the experience of internationally domiciled students by examining StudentSurvey.ie results for 2016 and 2020. The results demonstrated consistently greater engagement among internationally domiciled respondents than Irish domiciled respondents across time and across the elements of student engagement investigated in the survey. This paper concluded that higher education institutions in Ireland are delivering an educational experience to internationally domiciled students of comparable quality to that experienced by Irish domiciled students. Guigui, Faas, Darmody and Nic Fhlannchadha (in press) explored the factors which influence the engagement of PGR students, drawing on PGR StudentSurvey.ie 2019 and semi-structured interviews conducted in 2021. The results indicated that the needs of Irish and international postgraduate research students differed, with financial burden and disparity between perceived and subjective language proficiencies emerging as the most influential factors on time allocated to engagement for international PGR students. Such investigations offer rich opportunities to harness the experiences of internationally domiciled students in building higher education institutions which are innovative, flexible and highly globally interconnected in spite of the restrictions brought

about by the pandemic.

The results of StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie are one part of a bigger cycle, which emphasises promoting the survey, participating in the survey, analysing the results and achieving impact. Achieving impact is understood to mean identifying the value which has been added, and continues to be added, to the student experience by this data collection, analysis and the subsequent integration of results into policy and practice (Nic Fhlannchadha & Hackett, 2020). It involves real positive impacts in terms of highlighting indicative areas which appear to be working well, areas for improvement and areas for further development. The results presented in this paper are from six years of student feedback, from 2016 to 2021. The use of the same questions every year allows for comparison across the six years to explore change, if any, in students' perception of their experience and engagement with their institution. At a national level, i.e. the level of the average response for all students within all higher education institutions, demonstrable change is slow to become evident. At an institutional level, where anecdotally, it is known changes are happening on foot of the results of StudentSurvey.ie, staff and students within the institutions are best placed to measure, evaluate and understand the impact of those changes through interrogation of their institutional qualitative and quantitative data. The next phase of this research will focus on how participating institutions have used the results of StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie to achieve impact and to enhance the experience of students across the time of their enrolment in their institution.

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