

Higher Education for Good

Teaching and Learning Futures



Edited by
Laura Czerniewicz and Catherine Cronin



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14. “Vibrant, open and accessible”: Students’ visions of higher education futures

Sharon Flynn, Julie Byrne, Maeve Devoy, Jonathon Johnston, Rob Lowney, Eimer Magee, Kate Molloy, David Moloney, Morag Munro, Fernandos Ongolly, Jasmine Ryan, Suzanne Stone, Michaela Waters, and Kyle Wright

Introduction

This chapter links past, present, and near-future perspectives to explore tensions in Ireland’s higher education, emerging from a national-level student partnership research study focused on experiences of digital education across the sector. The chapter brings together student, academic, and other professional staff voices from various institutional contexts in a “future studies” approach (Daytor, 2002), building on work by Selwyn et al. (2020) and others. Student-articulated visions of the near future arising from a collaborative national teaching enhancement project are used as stimulus material here. The chapter explores how tensions between differing stakeholder perspectives on the near future of higher education in our context might be reconciled.

Our chapter develops around the following key questions:

- Why is student participation and student visioning of the future important in realising higher education for good (HE4Good)?
- What do students think an ideal learning future looks like, and how does this future align with the HE4Good concept?

The chapter first outlines and discusses the authors' commitment to students-as-partners (SaP) approaches in higher education (HE), and explores why it is crucial to draw on student perspectives when discussing potential pathways for higher education institutions. We then provide context and a project methodology underpinning a national sectoral collaboration, the Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning (EDTL) project that informs the development of this chapter.

We move from reflecting on and documenting the EDTL project to articulating the methodological background justifying our use of speculative fiction as a mechanism for envisioning the near future of the Irish HE sector. Key themes arising from student-generated speculative fiction are discussed in terms of how they relate to higher education in our national context, and linking current reality with potential futures for the sector. We conclude by offering key points of reflection and recommendations to potentially impact positively on concepts of HE4Good as expressed elsewhere in this volume.

Contributors to this chapter include academic and academic-related staff, professional services and support staff, and perhaps most importantly, students whose lived experiences reflect and affect ongoing changes in society and HE. While our perspectives relate specifically to the Irish university context, we believe they will resonate with colleagues across HE more broadly. Student visions of change are woven together and explored to consider the potential for positive developments in Irish HE, navigating — potentially — towards a revised Irish higher education landscape in years to come. Taking a future studies approach to explore alternative futures for consideration — utopian and dystopian, likely and unlikely — we consider how best to move towards the most preferred visions of the future (Daytor, 2002; Sabzalieva et al., 2021). Data and student voice in the form of speculative fictional narratives gathered through the cross-institutional EDTL project provide the foundations for articulating these higher education futures.

Why are student participation and student visioning of the future important in realising HE4Good?

The Irish HE landscape is broad, varied, and includes traditional universities, technological universities, institutes of technology and

a range of other public and private providers. Participation rates are among the highest in the world, and internationally domiciled students make up 12.4% of the student population (CSO, 2022). The Irish Universities Association (IUA) is the representative voice of Ireland's research intensive, enterprise engaged, public universities. A stated aim of the IUA Strategy 2022–2025 is to support member universities in increasing access for students with disabilities and from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.¹

Navigating a pathway to HE4Good: Students as partners

Recent years have seen increasing recognition of the benefits of HE student-staff partnerships whereby "students are directly involved as change agents and partners within the system" (Collins et al., 2016, p. 16). As authors, we believe there is a real need for students and staff to engage as partners in learning. Such partnerships can generate benefits for all involved. Students are empowered to participate in shaping and improving the learning and teaching environment and supported in their development as critical thinkers and active citizens. For staff, partnering with students can offer an insight into what it is like to be a student today and can unearth and challenge existing assumptions about students and the student experience (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015; Mathews et al, 2018; NStEP, 2021; USI, 2018).

The EDTL project, led by the IUA, commenced in January 2019 with the aim of enhancing the digital attributes and educational experiences of Irish university students. This was achieved by mainstreaming and integrating the use of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment, and by addressing the professional development of those who teach or support teaching and learning. Since its inception, the project has advocated that "[the] student voice will be built into all project activities at a local university level" (Flynn et al., 2020, p. 5), concretising a SaP ethos as one of the four key principles underpinning the project. In the context of EDTL, student partnership has evolved from the recruitment of a single student intern working directly with the project team to more than 20 student interns embedded within each

1 IUA Strategy 2022–2025 <https://www.iua.ie/about/strategy/>

of the partner universities contributing directly to the enhancement of staff and student digital skills. The EDTL amplification of student voice has provoked institutional and sector-wide discussion about where and how students desire change in Ireland's higher education (EDTL, 2022).

Student-generated speculative fiction and Irish higher education futures

Selwyn et al. (2020) describe the residual deep "grammar" of late twentieth-century schooling (e.g. its role in the post-industrial complex as preparatory for labour markets) as remaining mainly unchanged despite a surface-visible shift towards digital. The EDTL experience suggests that a lack of deep change applies similarly to Irish HE, where there is often a patchwork approach to digital teaching and learning, with compartmentalised knowledge silos and a "slow" renovation and updating of digital technologies in the context of existing HE custom and practice. "Good" higher education is perceived differently by various actors and stakeholders, e.g. "good" education as a personal and societal developmental process, or "good" education as a marketable product. These tensions are particularly prominent in the context of the Irish tertiary (e.g. higher education) sector, which only coalesces as a coherent system in the late twentieth century. Unlike more overtly marketised systems of higher education, Irish HE sees a "repositioning of higher education to prioritise more intensive engagement with industry and deployment of market mechanisms on a large scale for the first time" from the late 1990s onwards (Walsh, 2018, pp. 488–89). Topics of ongoing discussion in the Irish HE sector include values and priorities around universities as a public good, the role of research in generating "new" knowledge, the status of teaching and learning, and how university and other third-level institutional administrations respond to competing priorities (Loxley et al., 2014).

Speculative fiction has been one strategy used to articulate alternative futures to those seemingly inevitable futures arising from the current shift towards neoliberalism (Selwyn, 2020) and to explore how "the digital" can open up new avenues in educational thinking (Ross, 2017, 2018; Macgilchrist et al, 2020). The genre is described as offering an opportunity to allow the imagination to "run wild" in exploring

possible futures (Kupferman, 2021). Suoranta et al. (2022) suggest that speculative fiction can "contribute to the development of a new normal where education will fulfil its mission to make the world a better place" (p. 228).

Speculative fiction is, perhaps inevitably, embedded in current experiences. We cannot predict or anticipate state of the art, without considering the state of the actual in embodied and localised lived experience (Selwyn, 2008). Who better, then, to provide insight into the state of the actual in higher education than current students? Student partners connected to the EDTL project were approached to develop responses in prose to questions around their vision of future higher education experiences. These visions are explored in greater detail and from a range of perspectives below.

Student perspectives on the near-future of higher education in Ireland

In March 2020, in the context of the rapid pivot to remote teaching and learning due to COVID-19, student-staff partnerships became even more important as a core value. The EDTL partnership ethos played a crucial role in enabling our cross-institutional project team to rapidly respond to the ongoing twists and turns of the pandemic context and in ensuring that our collaborative sectoral response was aligned to students' needs (EDTL, 2022; Ongolly & Flynn, 2022). Student interns collaborated to develop resources such as *The EDTL approach for students: A guide to remote learning — for students, by students*. At a local level, student-staff partnerships enabled the integration of existing staff knowledge about online learning and students' immediate experiences of remote learning due to the pandemic, into student-focused and staff-focused advice and supports (Johnston & Ryan, 2022; Kurz et al., 2022).

In April 2021, more than a year into the global pandemic, and at the end of a full academic year of remote learning, EDTL launched a social media campaign to ask Irish higher education students to articulate their aspirations for the post-pandemic-future of higher education. The *Your Education, Your Voice, Your Vision* campaign aimed to crowdsource a vision for university learning in an ideal world. Student responses from

across Ireland were sought in response to questions co-developed with partner institutions.

The *Your Education, Your Vision, Your Voice* campaign was coordinated and managed in partnership with a team of student interns who analysed, coded and interpreted the results. More than 14,000 responses indicated that, for most HE students in Ireland, an on-campus experience is prized. The need for physical presence was tempered by the desire for flexibility, with 76% of respondents articulating a preference for no more than three days a week to be spent on the physical campus. Student preference for study location indicated a more divided range of opinions, with 58% of respondents opting to study from home if possible and 42% preferring to study from a university campus. The survey revealed a particularly high affinity for face-to-face interactions with staff and peers. Most students (80%) were explicit about not wanting face-to-face interactions with staff to be wholly replaced with online interactions. Student responses suggested that a preference for campus presence relates to engagement and interaction with peers, for social purposes and/or peer learning. This might broadly be summarised as “the college experience” (events, atmosphere, making friends etc.), campus facilities (access to institutionally provided digital tools and technologies, wifi, computer access, library resources etc.), and perhaps less obvious affordances of in-person interaction such as students’ perceptions of enhanced focus/motivation (EDTL, 2021).

Overall, three key ideals for post-COVID-19 HE emerged from the national student voice campaign. First, there was a clear student demand for increased blended learning opportunities to provide access to, and support for, a more diverse range of students. Blended learning can potentially support students with differing circumstances, e.g. students with children or other caring responsibilities, those in full or part-time employment, students with disabilities, and/or those experiencing financial, time, or distance barriers to study. Second, there was a strong student demand to re-imagine the nature of assessment to more accurately reflect student learning and post-graduate application of skills and to remove the stress of exams. Four-fifths of respondents (81%) were critical of traditional exam-based assessment modalities and expressed preferences for open-book and/or continuous assessments. Finally, technological supports for learning such as the ability to review

(pre)recorded lectures on grounds of convenience, flexibility, and inclusivity were perceived as essential in terms of providing a baseline of access for students who feel learning is negatively impacted by the realities of long-distance commutes.

This national level coordination of student preferences and visions of Irish higher education futures through the *Your Education, Your Voice, Your Vision* campaign, laid the foundations for a deeper exploration of some of these themes. Following on from this, and in preparation to write this chapter, current EDTL student partners were invited to respond to the following prompt: "What would a day in the life of a student look like in 2042"? This "medium-distance" future aimed to provide students with space to envision changes, radical or otherwise, to the lived experience of students in Irish higher education.

Articulating the future: Supporting students in a future-focused writing process

To support the writing process, student partners were encouraged to engage with a short online workshop led by a storyteller and writer. The workshop started with a group discussion about the future for learning in higher education, facilitating open discussion on how this might look in 2042. Students were encouraged to unpack their understanding of what might be required for the future of HE to be "good" and invited to teleport themselves into the future or, perhaps, to consider their children's future. An initial window of scaffolded free writing was followed by further discussion and sharing of ideas. Students were then asked to produce an individual written piece (approximately 500 words) on a day in the life of a student in 2042.

Five student partners representing both domestic and international student perspectives from across four different universities rose to the challenge. Three undergraduates and two postgraduate students from a range of disciplinary backgrounds articulated their own visions of a higher education future, bringing perspectives from business, politics, anthropology, biopharmaceutical engineering and creative digital media. Redefined power dynamics in HE, technological advancements, and calls to reconfigure the physical campus were common features in all five of the student contributions. There was a common acknowledgement

of tensions between thinking about what they would like to see (i.e. utopian, imaginable, desirable), and considering what might be possible (e.g. achievable, implementable, doable) in their sculpting of the future.

“In the future, everybody can learn”: Students’ ideal visions of higher education futures

Student visions of the future are shared here and grouped thematically for discussion and analysis:

1. Curriculum, learning and assessment
2. A supportive environment for learning
3. Social and political change
4. The campus reimaged

1. Curriculum, learning, and assessment

Perhaps unsurprisingly, formal learning activities featured heavily in and across students’ vignettes. Students conceive these learning activities in different ways. Some envision content and learning materials shifting towards more practical and vocational orientations. In doing so, students framed higher education in terms of employability and preparation for the world of work.

Imagined future curricula are closely aligned to students’ perceptions of future employment opportunities. The alignment of curricula with employability has been a key feature of policy in Irish higher education for some time (Fortune et al., 2021; Frawley et al, 2020; HEA, 2020; NFTL, 2019). However, focusing solely on preparation for the world of work sits uncomfortably alongside wider ideas around the idea of the university and emerging narratives that counter employability discourse as the sole remit of higher education (NFTL, 2019):

The type of courses offered by [university] have altered to provide a workforce for the evolving needs of business, technology and industry. The uptake of courses centred around sustainability, big data and analytics, automation, machine learning and artificial intelligence has risen, and this reflects the type of jobs available to graduates. Elements

of data science are integrated into more courses as the demands for data literacy expands.

This focus on data science, data, and technology affected how some students imagined future learning and teaching experiences:

In 2042, the majority of teaching is online (live/recorded lectures, workshops), with value adding activities in person to facilitate group discussions (tutorials, labs). There is less prioritisation of being on campus. There is a general understanding that a physical presence does not equal effective learning.

The idea that being on campus is no longer prioritised, echoes Bayne et al.'s (2016, 2020) perspective on the need to move away from privileging on-campus presence. However, this speculative narrative is in tension with current practices in the Irish higher education sector, where a move to fully on-campus education has been widespread in the initial post-pandemic phase (Donnelly, 2022; MacKenzie et al., 2022).

In students' visions of the future, digital tools and practices are embedded in every aspect of teaching, learning, and assessment, and have met the long-held expectations to transform the university experience by creating a new sense of the university as a fluid space, beyond the campus. A key refrain is the presence of a desire for inclusive practice:

Dedicated virtual machines give these remote students the opportunity to access all of the same technologies as those who attend in person, ensuring that no student is forgotten about and has an equal chance to learn and succeed.

[...] module content is inclusive and suitable for diverse learner needs. Assistive digital tools are regarded as aids for all students. Exams are primarily online, with continuous assessment-based assignments. Deadlines are spread out to relieve pressure on students. Alternative forms of assessment used, we are not focused on written exams suited for rote learners, instead creativity is appreciated e.g. poster, presentation, submit essay in video format, podcast, simulations, case studies, virtual reality.

The fluidity of the campus was extended to suggest potential cross disciplinary, cross institutional, and even global connection and cooperation:

Teaching techniques and delivery methods have become more centralised across colleges, making content more interchangeable.

The incongruity between the perspectives of students on future curricula, learning and assessment with that of recent academic discourse, emphasises the importance of including students as partners when imagining higher education futures. This is particularly important for those involved in guiding and supporting the design and delivery of future curricula.

2. A supportive and inclusive environment for learning

Current students saw a commitment to inclusive teaching reflecting an enhanced and differentiated understanding of what it means “to be a student” in 2042. Universities in the future are likely to be tasked with providing a much higher level of student support, both in terms of explicit “supports” and also in how they negotiate the reality of a changing student profile:

Mental Health services have become more accessible for students and counselling services are more readily available to students who need it. Improving student welfare has led to the creation of spaces in the student centre for meditation and yoga, offering an opportunity to switch off from digital demands.

The demands of life, college, and work are accessible by student support and wrap-around services that are empathically run and responsibly funded.

Changes to student “face time” on site also impact on and flow from increased digital facilities. Current students expressed real concerns about commuting and accommodation, particularly in the context of Ireland’s housing and cost-of-living crisis as well as the global climate crisis. To that end, virtual interactions were likely to be on the rise; physical interactions would be enabled through enhanced public transport provision:

As prices of accommodation in [university] rose, the benefits offered by blended and virtual learning offered a solution for students struggling to meet high rent prices.

The perfect day for a student on campus in 2042 is one where it’s rent day, but there’s no squabbling for money. They FaceTime their friend in

the next county whose online today because they're a commuter — but they commute by choice, not because of scarcity.

Learning will be less stressful as there will be no need for commuting and this will give the future student more opportunities to engage in hobbies and such as traveling etc.

The calls to improve public transport were heard and a Luas [tram] line now runs from the city centre to [university] and spans out to the outer suburbs of South Dublin, reducing the need for students to travel by car.

The reality of national tuition fee policy also impacted on student visions of change in the near future university as an issue connected with access, but also with societal and political change.

Understanding and prioritising students' needs must be central in developing a future HE4Good. Our focus on student voice and agency as articulating bottom-up visions from a community of scholarship resonates clearly with Bayne and Gallagher's (2021) account of Edinburgh University's top-down *Near Future Teaching* project, where they state that "universities need to get better at crafting their own, compelling counter-narratives concerning the future of technology in teaching, in order to assert the agency and presence of the academic and student bodies in the face of technological change" (p. 608). We suggest from our experience of partnership that students are particularly well placed to contribute to these narratives.

3. Social and political change

At the time of writing, accessing Irish higher education involves the highest fees for domestic tuition paid by individual students in the European Union. This is occluded as a rhetoric of "free fees" is offset by the presence of an annually levied "student registration charge". Given that financial circumstances profoundly affect students' access to and experience of HE, it is perhaps unsurprising that questions of access to education and sustainability in funding are reflected in writing about the university of the near future. Student narratives of the future demonstrate clear expectations for enhanced access and an assumption of greater governmental subsidy for third-level education:

With the radical drop in tuition fees, even those on the lowest end of the income ladder can attend university, with the bulk of fees subsidised by the government, helping all students realise their dream and study the subject they have always wanted to.

Another feature that emerges strongly is a continuing trend towards “the digital university”. National restrictions in response to COVID-19 accelerated uptake and integration of digital tools into everyday teaching and learning practices. Students suggest that in the future, the responsibility to support learning in the digital context will fall upon the institution rather than the individual:

Colleges must supply technology more readily to students due to the heavy emphasis on digital technology in learning.

While our institutions collectively have done much to smooth the experience of remote learning, clearly there is still work to be done to advance and empower students to participate fully:

The influence of the Irish Universities Association but, primarily, the impact of student partnership across departments, universities and sectors kicked everything into motion. In the background, students felt continually more empowered and acknowledged.

Visions of student empowerment suggest that student voice can influence future developments in HE.

An ideal student outlook in 2042 is one wherein they (students) recognise and exercise their potential for positive change. Empowering students to provoke change, build relationships, and change perspectives in Irish universities lead to better resources, representation, and redistribution.

4. The campus reimaged

The physical college campus still holds a central place in students’ visions of the future but their writing reveals a radical revision of space and a transformed college campus — collaborative, flexible, and accessible:

The ideal campus in 2042 is one with a vibrant, open, and accessible campus that students stroll about

Buildings have been adapted to maximise space for students and staff. Pods are offered for online meeting spaces. Lecture halls, tutorial rooms and the library are used as self-study areas when not in use.

The dated library and [other] building have been replaced with buildings with more collaborative spaces, improved technology services and more study spaces. Books and archives have been digitalised and libraries have become more of a space for collaboration and study.

Improving campus facilities to facilitate collaboration, flexibility and accessibility for learners would seem to be natural enhancements to the current state, but it is unclear whether foundations are currently being laid for these enhancements. Scoping, planning and funding campus development is a multi-year process, so seeds for the campus of 2042 need to be planted today. Campus development and construction has increased significantly in HE in recent years (Wolff, 2019), and Ireland is no exception. Whether these facilities are future-focused or rooted in 20th century conceptions of a physical university, time will show. Additionally, and against an ongoing backdrop of systemic underfunding in comparison to similar tertiary education contexts, construction costs have risen significantly since COVID-19 lockdowns (O'Halloran, 2022). Whether innovative new facilities will be developed as students hope remains, yet, to be seen.

Irrespective of how campus development is planned and implemented, students are clear that their vision of the future campus is a pragmatic one. Echoing Brown's (2015) digital learning ecology model, the focus is on learning itself, supported by the affordances of physical campus in conjunction with the affordances of digital environment, leading to a shared understanding of the value of online and in person learning.

There is less prioritisation of being on campus. There is a general understanding that a physical presence does not equal effective learning.

Any in-person classes, tutorials and labs are organised on the same days (1–3 days a week). This offers greater flexibility to students and endeavours to make education more accessible for all, while still maintaining that level of face-to-face interaction that students value so highly.

Finally, some students envisage a shift away from the physical towards virtual infrastructure, with technology redefining the possibilities for how students learn:

... I see a future where more advanced technology such as virtual reality gadgets will be easily accessible to all with the possibility of experiencing touch (especially for technical/lab-based fields). This way, students will be able to see, hear, and feel in their virtual environments... universities will channel more funds towards improving virtual learning infrastructure and less on physical building.

Conclusion: Pathways to progress

Two key features have emerged clearly through our engagement with student-generated speculative fiction. First, these students' views of the future clearly respond to current anxieties and concerns. Students' writing suggests that broader solutions to the challenges they face in their current lives are there to be found: joined-up thinking about the affordability of accommodation, public transport and welfare supports are foundational features of these student visions of the future. Flexibility in study "mode" is identified as a desirable feature and being able to choose freely between in-person and remote learning modalities is a widely accepted feature of future scenarios.

Second, student visions of the future of higher education are strikingly positive: there is a hopeful future for the sector. Students see the (many) current challenges as not insurmountable, particularly when driven by a student partnership approach that aims to develop a culture of shared responsibility and high levels of trust between staff and empowered students.

We think it crucial to consider student participation when imaging the future of higher education: engaging in students-as-partners approaches has afforded us a renewed commitment to active staff-student collaboration when exploring next steps and looking ahead to the future of the Irish higher education sector. Student voice has been a key influencing factor on our practice and philosophies of higher education. We see student voice, agency, and partnership as crucial factors informing how to chart a path towards HE4Good and look forward to contrasting the reality of near-future teaching against the student visions of the future articulated in this chapter.

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