

## WP2 – Student Success Strategy:

# Commentary on the Analysis of Higher Education Policy for Student Success

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## Introduction

This document shares the outcome of an analysis of higher education (HE) policy documents on student success. The commentary builds on the work presented in the document “Overview of Higher Education Policy for Student Success”. The purpose of this document is to inform the Action Plan development phase of the Student Success Initiative.

## Context

Student success is viewed as an important outcome of higher education (HE) in key Irish policy and strategy documents, for example, the HEA Bill 2022 and the National Access Plan 2022 2028. Moreover, the pillars of student success, for example diversity and inclusion, employability, and student-centred learning and teaching, are firmly embedded across policy documents. Ten key messages to inform action planning are outlined below. The “messages” are grounded in the analysis of the policy documents (summarised in **Tables 6 and 7** in the overview document) and is supported by the grid analysis of the dominant themes across documents (**Tables 4 and 5** in the overview document) in the overview document.

## The Messages

1. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are viewed as playing a pivotal role in shaping fair, democratic, and inclusive societies **and** supporting sustained growth, innovation, and employment. **Equipping students to make their individual contribution to societal and economic development** is considered key to realising this ambition. This thinking has two main implications. Firstly, it assumes higher educational programmes will address multiple ‘needs’, the individual student’s unique learning and development needs, professional or disciplinary specific learning outcomes, community needs, and business and enterprise needs. This has implications for curriculum design, programme learning outcomes, and teaching, learning, and assessment approaches. Secondly, it assumes students will have opportunities to safely ‘practice’ these attributes and skills. HEIs modelling and creating opportunities for students to learn about and value, for example democratic and equitable practices, active citizenship, tolerance, and openness, is viewed to be part and parcel of HEIs mission as places of learning. **Authentic student-staff partnership at all institutional levels** is considered critical to student socialisation and learning about democratic culture and practices. Possible areas for meaningful student-staff engagement include curriculum design, teaching and learning, governance and management, and quality assurance and enhancement. The focus on societal **and** economical contribution also calls for innovative **work and community engagement experiences** such as placements, fieldwork, work related projects or authentic “real world” assignments or simulations, service learning, and entrepreneurships. The notion of HEIs as “open” or “without walls” puts the onus on HEI staff and students to engage with external communities (local, regional, and European), working collaboratively on local and wider societal or enterprise challenges. The benefits of exposing students to working collaboratively with others outside of their discipline and to engaging in real-life problem solving is highlighted.

2. A related theme is a focus on the **transformative potential of education**, on nurturing talent, and on students achieving personal potential. This implies an individualised and student-centred approach across all student interactions with HEI staff, structures, and processes. Supporting students at transition points, removing barriers, and generating a sense of belonging are identified as enablers of transformative learning experiences and student success. Embedding student success, therefore, requires a **whole-of-institution approach**. Learning analytics has something to offer in personalising and supporting students experience, for example, by helping to identify student at 'risk'. Students too must play their part by taking responsibility for their own learning and actively engaging with the opportunities provided.
3. **Accepting that student success is individual to each student implies learning, teaching and assessment must be inclusive and student-centred**. Student centredness means learning opportunities and assessment are tailored to the needs and abilities of diverse students. This calls for inclusive teaching, implementing active learning approaches in the classroom or online, and increased partnership between students and staff in planning learning opportunities. However, student centred teaching and learning is an ambiguous term. So, working to define what student centredness means for Maynooth University, sharing strategies for implementing student centred teaching and assessment (and feedback) when working with large groups, and practical input on areas such as "what reasonable accommodation means" would be helpful to embedding a student-centred approach.
4. There is a strong focus on **employability and skill development** across policies. Skill development is viewed more broadly than simply 'job' or disciplinary specific skills. Rather the focus is on developing disciplinary specific knowledge and skills *and* transversal skills. Transversal skills equip students to be adaptable and flexible, so to some degree 'future-proofs' their skills. Transversal skills include critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving, digital competency, and entrepreneurship (including social entrepreneurship). In context of meeting enterprise and societal skill needs, there is an emphasis on working in partnership with employers and community groups 'in' the HEI though their contribution to curriculum design, guest lecturing, devising work-based projects etc., and 'outside' the HEI through employers creating placement opportunities, staff-student-other partnership in community projects etc. Interesting suggestions for promoting skill development is the establishment of "living labs" and "incubators" to enable HEIs to provide students with opportunities to work collaboratively, that is with staff, across disciplines, and with people outside the university, on societal and environmental challenges or entrepreneurship projects ([European Strategy for Universities](#), European Commission, 2022)
5. In tandem with the idea of 'future-proof' skills is **a focus on lifelong and life-wide learning**. The lifelong learner has highly individualised learning needs, they engage for different purposes (personal or professional development), and at different stages of their lives. In context of employability skills documents stress the importance of providing opportunities for upskilling and reskilling. This focus has multiple implications for the HE sector including, a requirement to have multiple access and exit points, a need for more joined up collaboration between institutions (locally, nationally, and across Europe) and other sectors, for example, the Further Education sector, and putting in place a flexible credit accumulation system that travels with the student across institutions and sectors. One suggested way of promoting and supporting lifelong learning is through the provision of high-quality micro-credentials. Noteworthy is the suggestion to explore including micro-credentials in the national framework of qualifications (NFQ) ([European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience](#), European Commission, 2020)

6. A priority across documents is **improving equality of opportunity and increasing diversity**. Typically, this means the student (and staff) population mirror the national population. Inclusion is about fairness and justice - a way of levelling social inequalities - and is considered to have tangible benefits for HEIs, society, and the economy. Benefits include having access to a wider range of experiences and perspectives, challenging traditional thinking, and increasing the potential of finding creative solutions to challenging problems. Inclusion in the classroom requires awareness, an individualised approach, and specific skills in UDL (universal design for learning). This is a key area for continuous professional development for students and staff. However, similar to lifelong learning, EDI (equity/equality, diversity, and inclusion) has many implications for the HE sector, for example, flexible provision and flexible delivery (online and in-person).
7. The **centrality of “excellent” teaching and learning** for achieving the goals articulated across policy documents is acknowledged across documents. Building the capacity of staff who teach is recognised as critical for success. The areas identified for CPD are varied and include, EDI strategies and approaches such as universal design for learning (UDL), using learning analytics effectively and responsibly to personalise student learning experiences, student centred teaching, learning and assessment approaches, and the use of technology to enhance learning and teaching. However, all staff who interact with students have CPD needs for embedding student success. For example, it has been suggested that administrative staff who interact frequently with students should have EDI training ([Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in European Higher Education Institutions](#) Claeys-Kulik et al., for EUCEN/EUA, 2018) In short, a whole-of-institution approach to access and student success has implications for the CPD of all staff.
8. Enhancing teaching and learning requires, an **enabling culture** (institutional and sectoral), **valuing teaching** and confirming its parity with other activities, **the ‘right’ infrastructure** (physical and digital), and adequate **resourcing**. Evidence-based teaching and learning, pedagogical innovation, innovative curricular design, and sharing good practice are considered essential to the enhancement of learning. Possible mechanisms to support these practices, in addition to CPD discussed above, include establishing fora where staff can share practice, team support when engaged in designing curricula, access to resources on best practice, and staff mentoring. Recognising, valuing, and rewarding teaching excellence is considered helpful to making the importance of teaching more visible.
9. **Student mental health and wellbeing is interwoven with student success**. There is a strong argument for embedding wellbeing and mental health promotion in curricula. How, is less straightforward but the consensus suggests curriculum infusion may be the most feasible option. Other possibilities for promoting and supporting student wellbeing include, CPD for HEI staff on student support and referral, establishing and bedding-in peer-support interventions, and engaging with the Healthy Campus initiative ([Higher Education Healthy Campus and Charter Ireland – Supporting Health and Wellbeing](#) DE/HSE/HEIs, 2021). Learning analytics has potential for supporting students’ wellbeing, mental health, and sense of belonging. Worth noting that promoting student wellbeing and mental health is also considered a whole-of-institution activity.
10. **Education for sustainable development** has emerged as a major focus for HE, bringing new challenges for curriculum design and the need for pedagogical innovation. European documents refer to the “twin transitions” – green and digital – with a focus on the skills needed to support these transitions. This focus has implications for all disciplines not just STEM. It is argued all students should be climate, environmental and digitally literate ([European Strategy for Universities](#) European Commission, 2022). Increasing STEM graduates and fostering

entrepreneurial and transversal skills forms part of the European Skills Agenda ([European Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience](#) European Commission, 2020)

## Conclusion

The spirit and emphasis across policy documents is captured in this quote:

*“Student learning needs and success, including high-quality learning, progress and retention, must remain at the centre of universities’ educational mission. At the same time, the broader purposes of higher education should be borne in mind: personal development, active citizenship, the employability of graduates and the development and maintenance of a broad and advanced knowledge base (Council of Europe 2007).*

*All educational offerings should be geared towards ensuring that, and assessing whether, students achieve the intended learning outcomes. In defining them, the knowledge and skills required by future graduates should be front and centre.*

*The desired learning outcomes should be achieved through the active engagement of students in their own learning process. These include discipline-specific knowledge that graduates acquire, but also transversal skills, such as critical thinking, digital and data literacy and intercultural skills, that will enable them to take up active roles in society and in professional careers”*

([Learning and Teaching in Europe’s Universities: An EUA Position Paper](#), EUA, 2018 p.1)

In one sense this is an ambitious statement but in another it reflects what Maynooth University staff and students already *do*. There are many examples across Maynooth University of good practice in supporting students, teaching and learning, skill development, pedagogical innovation, curriculum reform, and student-staff partnerships. A benefit of a focus on “student success” is making these examples more visible as they tend to be known about at departmental, team or individual level but less so beyond. Learning about and from each other’s experience and expertise increases the potential of mainstreaming this learning across Maynooth University.

Analysis of policy shows “student success” is an important objective. It has the potential to be more than another KPI though. At heart is it about “*success for all*” students, staff and Maynooth University. It is about knowing and supporting our students, inclusion, good teaching, fair and effective assessment, meaningful student-staff partnerships, and lifelong and life-wide learning. It is about innovation, excellence, and working collaboratively. **Simply, it is about what we want to do and be known for.** Ultimately, a focus on “student success” has the potential to transform students and staffs experience and positively impact on our community and beyond.