

2022 European Quality Assurance Forum

Shaping or sharing? QA in a value-driven EHEA

Hosted by West University of Timisoara, Romania

17-19 November 2022

ISSN: 1375-3797

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Short bio (150 words max):

Dr Siobhán Nic Fhlannchadha is Project Manager of StudentSurvey.ie (the Irish Survey of Student Engagement). She previously worked as Research and Operations Officer for the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) and the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR), which are higher education entry schemes for students with disabilities and/or from socio-economically and socio-culturally disadvantaged backgrounds. Siobhán was awarded a doctorate in psychology from University College Dublin in 2016, with funding from COGG (*An Chomhairle um Oideachas Gaeltacht agus Gaelscolaíochta*). Born and raised in Conamara, County Galway, Siobhán is a first language speaker of Irish. She sits on the Board of Directors of An Taibhdhearc, the National Irish Language Theatre.

Proposal

Title: Listening to voices that matter: The necessity of national surveys of student engagement for governance and quality assurance of higher education

Abstract:

Enhancing the effectiveness of quality assurance for the future of HEIs cannot happen without the inclusion of the multiple perspectives of the most important player in the process – the students. This paper presents data from the Irish Survey of Student Engagement 2016-2021, based on the responses of 232,450 first and final year undergraduate and taught postgraduate students. The focus is on students' social experience and development. It also includes aggregated national results addressing the impact of COVID-19 in 2021, at the height of the pandemic in Ireland. These two sources of quantitative and qualitative data demonstrate the significant negative impact of COVID-19 on students' social development and experience. The results demonstrate the value of student feedback in shaping, safeguarding and promoting shared values, as well as the need for student participation, including through quality assurance mechanisms such as national surveys, in the governance and quality assurance of higher education.

1. Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction and Background

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 higher education institutions (HEIs), and to inform national policy.

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 institution (HEI) they attend (Kuh, 2009, 2001; Trowler, 2010). 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). 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 HEIs deploy resources and organise curricula and other learning opportunities to facilitate and encourage students to participate in activities that are linked to learning. 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.

The comprehensive nature of data gathered is a key strength of this national project. Interpretation of detailed results requires appreciation of the local context. This means that staff and students within participating HEIs are best placed to interrogate institutional data. HEIs can use StudentSurvey.ie results as a tool to understand and improve the student experience and to measure the impact of recent interventions. At a sectoral level, StudentSurvey.ie data are used by the national quality assurance and enhancement agency Quality and Qualifications Ireland and by the Higher Education Authority, as well as 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 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.

Higher education in Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic

In response to the growing threat posed by the spread of COVID-19, all HEIs 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 by QQI (2020) suggested that the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of students in HEIs 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. HEIs 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 HEIs 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 HEIs 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.

Approach and demographics

StudentSurvey.ie invites responses from first year undergraduate, final year undergraduate and taught postgraduate students in HEIs in Ireland. Participation is encouraged by the senior management and student representatives in all HEIs. The survey responses are securely collected, anonymised and aggregated to national results. It is these national-level results that are presented in the annual StudentSurvey.ie National Report and in this paper. The anonymous dataset for each individual HEI is returned to that HEI for local analysis and action.

The survey consists of 67 questions. Most questions relate to a specific engagement indicator and are grouped as such. In 2021, five multiple choice questions and two open-ended questions specifically addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic were added alongside the established survey instrument. The full results are published in the StudentSurvey.ie Interim Results Bulletin 2021 (StudentSurvey.ie, 2021a; see also Nic Fhlannchadha, Lau & Stanley, 2022).

Twenty five HEIs participated in StudentSurvey.ie in 2021, yielding a response rate of 28.4%. A total of 232,450 students responded to StudentSurvey.ie between 2016 and 2021, 43,791 students of which responded in 2021 alone. 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. All results presented have been weighted by gender, mode of study and cohort within a given year.

Results

1. Students' experiences and view of social development: 2016-2021

This section presents quantitative and qualitative data for respondents in 2016-2021, focusing on the indicators which relate to students' social development.

A note on 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. Responses to questions are converted to a 60-point scale. Indicator scores cannot be combined across indicators to calculate an average overall indicator score in any meaningful or statistically sound way.

This paper focuses on the following indicators:

Collaborative Learning

Supportive Environment

Reflective and Integrative Learning

Effective Teaching Practices

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 a scale from 1 to 4, with 1 meaning Never and 4 meaning Very Often.

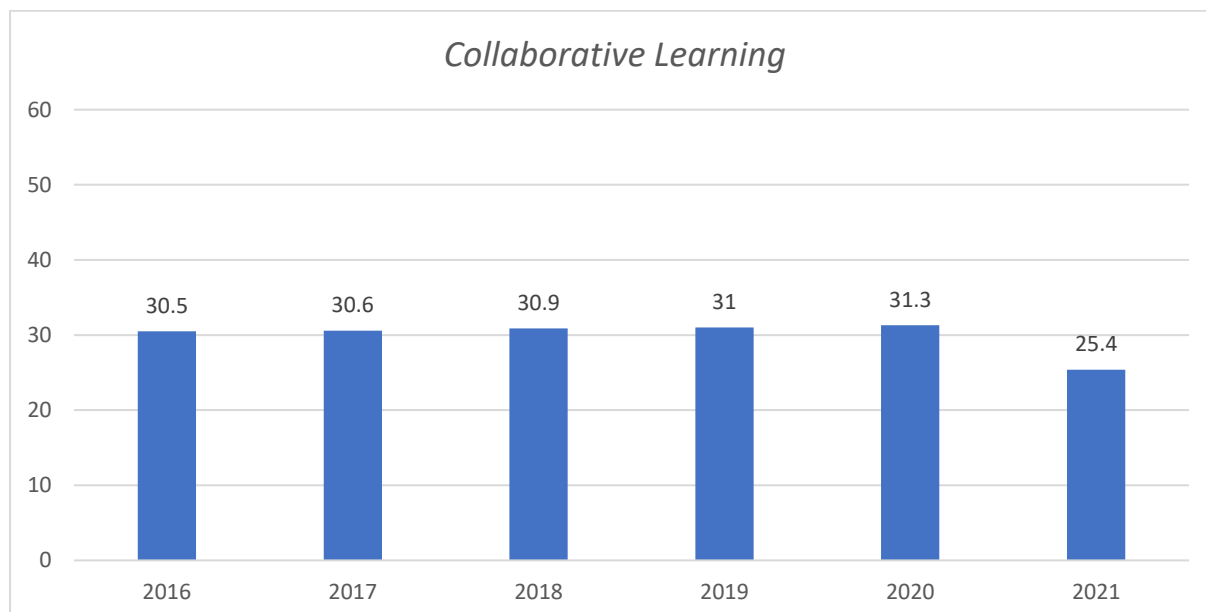


Fig. 1 *Collaborative Learning* indicator scores 2016-2021

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.

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 a scale from 1 to 4, with 1 meaning Very Little and 4 meaning Very Much.

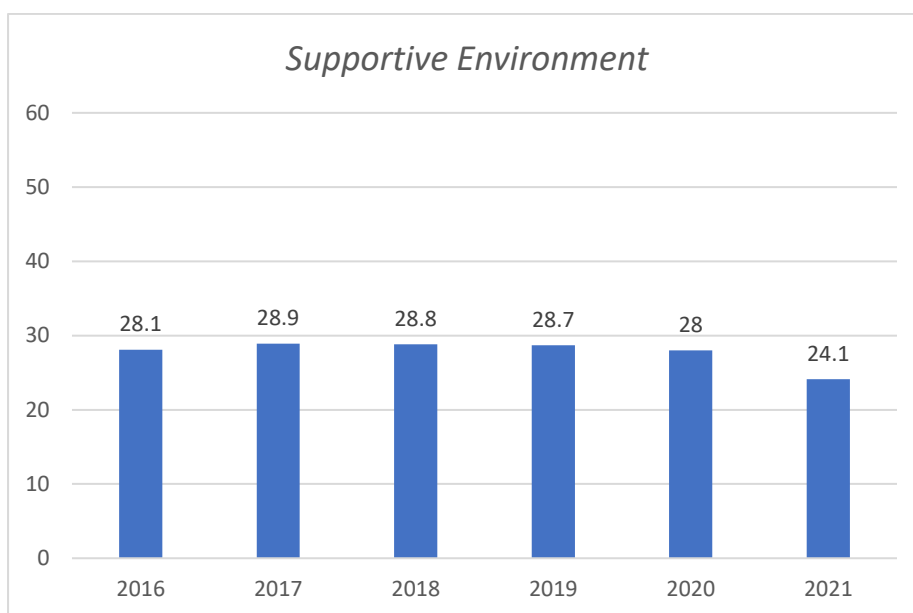


Fig. 2 *Supportive Environment* indicator scores 2016-2021

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.

Reflective and Integrative Learning

The *Reflective and Integrative Learning* indicator score is calculated from responses to 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.

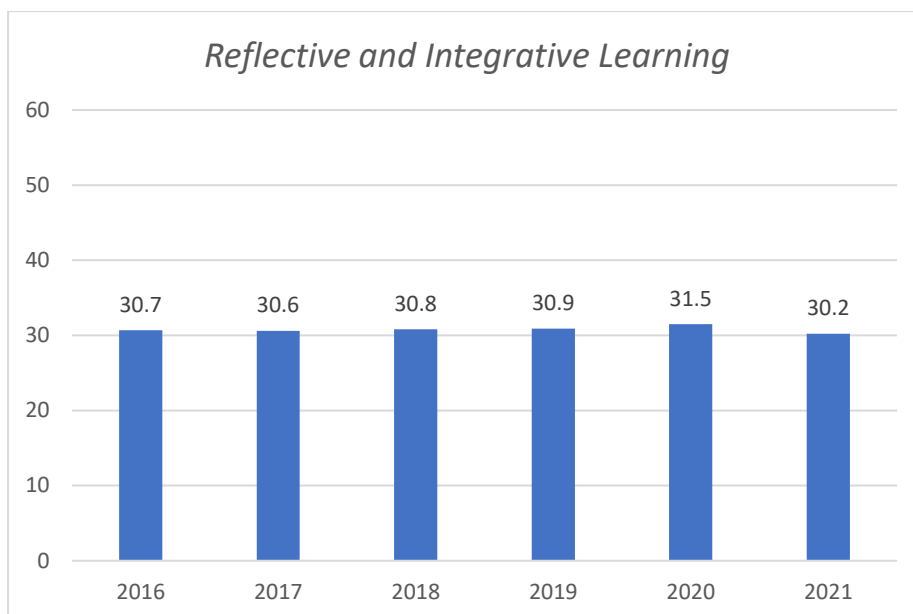


Fig. 3 *Reflective and Integrative Learning* indicator scores 2016-2021

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.

Effective Teaching Practices

The *Effective Teaching Practices* indicator score is calculated from responses to 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.

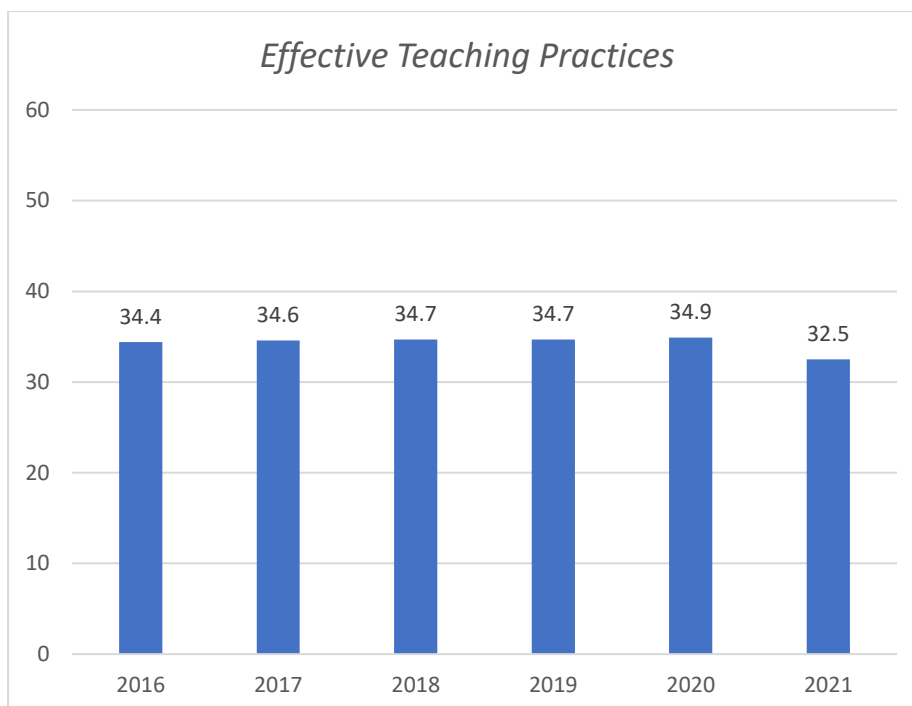


Fig. 4 *Effective Teaching Practices* indicator scores 2016-2021

The national average indicator score for *Effective Teaching Practices* has increased slightly from 2016 to 2020. However, the national average indicator score for *Effective Teaching Practices* in 2021 was significantly lower than all other years.

Qualitative Data

The qualitative data for StudentSurvey.ie are generated by two questions; what does your institution do best to engage students in learning, and what could your institution do to improve students' engagement in learning? One theme in the responses to the first of these questions described by McCashin & Boyd (2021) in their thematic analysis of the 2020 qualitative data was a consideration of support and personal development. Students identified a wider sense of support on campus – for example, availability of space, facilities, services, free resources – as being helpful to not just their learning, but also their personal development. This theme also related to more holistic perceptions of support – students mentioned a sense of support being felt campus-wide or within a sense of community, peer interactions, diversity, and positive activities such as those within clubs and societies. Diffley, Devenney, Cunningham and O'Rourke (2021) concluded from their analysis of the qualitative data from 2019 and 2020 that strong relationships with their lecturers have many benefits for students. Students feel more comfortable in the class environment, asking more questions as a result. In addition, students expressed the ability to voice their opinions, greater flexibility, more enjoyable classes, greater ease of learning, extra assistance when necessary and greater involvement. Along the same lines, Erskine and Harmon (2021), whose research included an analysis of all qualitative data from 2016 to 2020, concluded that, if greater attention were paid to personal experiences by HEIs, academic staff and other points of contact between academic HEIs and students, one could see a virtuous cycle which reinforces other aspects of students' experiences and increases engagement.

2. Students' social development at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic

The results of StudentSurvey.ie 2021 are valuable because they provide standardised data from 43,791 students across 25 HEIs in Ireland. The results were all generated during national fieldwork carried out in February-March 2021, during which time Ireland was in Level 5 lockdown (the highest level of restrictions).

The results suggest that respondents felt supported in terms of ongoing effective and timely communication (80.8% somewhat/ definitely agree), adequate online learning opportunities (84.3% somewhat/ definitely agree), and their ability to access the online learning sufficiently (86.3% somewhat/ definitely agree). Fewer respondents indicated that they had a suitable study environment at home (74.0% somewhat/ definitely agree). First year undergraduate respondents consistently had the highest rate of agreement, followed closely by taught postgraduate respondents. For all questions, final year undergraduate respondents had the lowest level of agreement. The most striking difference was for how connected respondents felt to their HEI despite the restricted access to campus, with a slight majority disagreeing with this statement (47.1% somewhat/ definitely agree). Here, the taught postgraduate students agreed most strongly (53.5% somewhat/ definitely agree), while the first and final year undergraduates responded more similarly and at a lower rate (46.7% and 43.8% somewhat/ definitely agree, respectively).

There were 30,955 responses to the open-ended question "In what way(s) could your HEI improve its support for you during the current circumstances?". At the aggregate level, the responses overall largely focused on one area, communication, and students' desire to have more and better communication. Other themes that emerged were mentioned but to a much lesser extent, for example, seeking greater efforts through events and activities to mitigate the isolating effects that online teaching can have on students. First year undergraduates tended to mention things that have been missing from their student experience because of the shift to online learning, such as 'people', 'events' and 'activities'. Final year undergraduates focused on assessment. In contrast, taught postgraduates highlighted the cost of fees.

Summary of the results

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 scores for the areas of *Collaborative Learning*, *Supportive Environment*, *Reflective and Integrative Learning* and *Effective Teaching Practices* all increased from 2016 to 2020, but all fell significantly in 2021. The results of the new questions added to the survey in 2021 to address the impact of COVID-19 on student engagement suggest that the majority of respondents felt supported in terms of ongoing effective and timely communication, adequate online learning opportunities, and their ability to access the online learning sufficiently, while slightly fewer respondents indicated that they had a suitable study environment at home. The most striking difference was a small majority of respondents felt disconnected from HEI during the period of restricted access to campus.

Discussion and conclusions

The results of StudentSurvey.ie demonstrate the value of student feedback in shaping, safeguarding and promoting shared values. The results reveal what students do and do not value, and how they conceptualise and realise these values. Students are active participants in their HEI's democracy building and they co-create their experiences and their environments. StudentSurvey.ie allows us to understand this in greater depth and from a greater number of students than from informal feedback alone, or indeed from reductive surveys of student "satisfaction".

Students are constructively critical about their learning and social opportunities and of how staff in their HEI interact with them. Their responses to questions about areas such as *Reflective and Integrative Learning* and *Effective Teaching Practices*, in addition to the qualitative data, offer opportunities for improvement for all members of the higher education community, and specifically offer a significant contribution when effectively melded into quality assurance mechanisms. Students are experts in being students and can see opportunities other communities in HEIs cannot, for instance their identification of the impact of availability of space, facilities, services, and free resources as being transformative for their learning and personal development, which emerged from analysis of the qualitative data.

In Ireland, we are seeing momentum build in the use of StudentSurvey.ie data to influence national policy and strategy. The Higher Education Authority use StudentSurvey.ie results in their strategic dialogue with HEIs, and Quality and Qualifications Ireland require StudentSurvey.ie results be included in their Annual Institutional Quality Reports. Since the establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the results of StudentSurvey.ie have been incorporated into policy reviews in areas such as the response to COVID-19, internationalisation, and research and innovation. HEIs use the results to inform institutional decision-making across many areas, to shape actions like programme design, and to provide student facilities like libraries and learning supports. Those who do this most successfully do so in partnership with their student representative bodies. The next phase of this work will focus strongly on demonstrating the impact of this incorporation.

Finally, the results presented in this paper demonstrate how damaging it can be for students' experiences when the opportunities for engagement are disrupted, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic (see also Nic Fhlannchadha, Lau & Stanley, 2022, and StudentSurvey.ie, 2021a, for more results). The results of national surveys of student engagement provide a broad-based study of the experiences of students, including contemporary ones such as the continuation of online and blended teaching, learning and assessment. For instance, the results of StudentSurvey.ie 2021 demonstrated that hybrid or flexible models were favoured by some groups of students, such as those combining work and study, students with care commitments, and students with disabilities. Using a co-creation lens, results such as these can inform institutional decision-making and quality assurance in the context of shared values such as inclusion and diversity. For instance, from these results we learned that, to build on the potential offered by the continuation of a blended teaching and learning environment, consideration needs to be given to how teaching and learning communities of practice can be developed and maintained in an online environment. We also learned that consideration needs to be given to how virtual spaces can be designed to foster the collaborative action, social bonds, care and compassion so necessary to, and desired by, students.

Students in higher education right now are not just the workers of the future; they are the future citizens of the world. What they learn in higher education and how they are treated will influence that future world, and indeed the democracies and social structures, they build. The results presented in this paper demonstrate the need for student participation in governance and quality assurance of higher education, more specifically the need for meaningful participation in quality assurance mechanisms such as national surveys. HEIs need to hear the voices of their students as much as, if not more than, any other stakeholder group. Listening to students keeps HEIs true to their values. Indeed, if the experience of students is not deeply embedded into the mission and quality assurance mechanisms of a HEI, then that institution may want to reconsider its values.

2. Discussion questions for the session:

1. Is student feedback collected in a systematic and strategic way in your institution?
2. If so, are the results listened to and acted upon by those with the power to enhance the experiences of students in your institution?

3. References:

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