# World Café Report:

## staff reflections on and learning from online teaching

**Maynooth University**
National University
of Ireland Maynooth

## Maynooth Online

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**T&L** NATIONAL FORUM
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# Introduction

The period of emergency online teaching and learning brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic witnessed an increased use of digital technologies within teaching, learning and assessment in higher education and has done much to advance the digital agenda that has been at the core of national efforts to enhance higher education for a number of years (National Forum, 2018). This period also produced a smorgasbord of research and publications which sought to quantify the impact of this paradigm shift on staff and students (see, for example AHEAD, 2020; EDTL, 2021; Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020; USI, 2020).

This report seeks to add to this understanding by disseminating the proceedings of a World Café event held at Maynooth University (MU) on 10th November 2021.

The purpose of the event was to draw on the experiences and expertise of those who teach at MU to identify key learnings from this period and to chart a way forward, so that we, as an institution, can capitalise on this knowledge as we return to in-person teaching and learning.

# Methodology

Much data has been collected with which to examine the impact of the period of emergency teaching and learning on higher education, particularly from students' perspective (see, for example AHEAD, 2020; Hill & Fitzgerald, 2020; USI, 2020). While useful, in order to fully realise the benefits of digital technologies, these studies require further institutional contextualisation. Central to this is the voice of those who teach, who now represent a substantial reserve of relatively untapped knowledge and expertise. To facilitate this discussion, the seminar was run using a World Café methodology. This is a simple method for holding large group conversations that is used widely in a range of contexts including businesses and education. It involves dividing the attendees into several small physical or (as was the case with this online event) virtual tables. The host then introduces the purpose of the event and a discussion question. The tables then have 20-30 minutes to discuss this question. Each table keeps notes of their discussion until the question session ends at which point the tables feed back to the rest of the groups and the host. This process is then repeated with a new question.

This methodology allows for knowledge exchange (within and across tables) and the identification of themes that emerge from across these discussions.

The World Café methodology ensures that all individuals can contribute to the discourse, while ensuring that this knowledge can be harvested by the host. This methodology was thus ideal in enabling conversations to happen in Maynooth, allowing us to capture important discussions about the past, present and future of education within the institution and to utilise this knowledge in formulating policy as we move into a post-pandemic world. To fully account for the experiences of the broad scope of teaching roles and contexts, the event was open to all who teach at Maynooth (including academic, professional support, library staff and others). This broad cohort allowed for an interdisciplinary discussion that provided an appreciation of not only the challenges that different teaching and learning contexts produce but also helped to identify shared challenges and solutions.

In addition, in providing an inclusive and, to use the words of attendees, 'humanizing experience', it will aid in securing support for innovation from a cohort who are best placed to drive innovation in the delivery of digital teaching and learning.

**For this World Café event we had two questions:**

**Firstly:** What are the dilemmas/opportunities triggered by our experience with remote teaching?

**Secondly:** What seeds might we plant together today that could make the most difference to the future of digital pedagogies at Maynooth?

This report will divide responses to these questions into four categories: benefits of online/digital teaching and learning; challenges to online/digital teaching and learning; reflections on meeting these challenges; and proposals and suggestions to enhance online/digital teaching and learning at MU.

# Benefits of online learning

**Figure 1.** Benefits of online learning
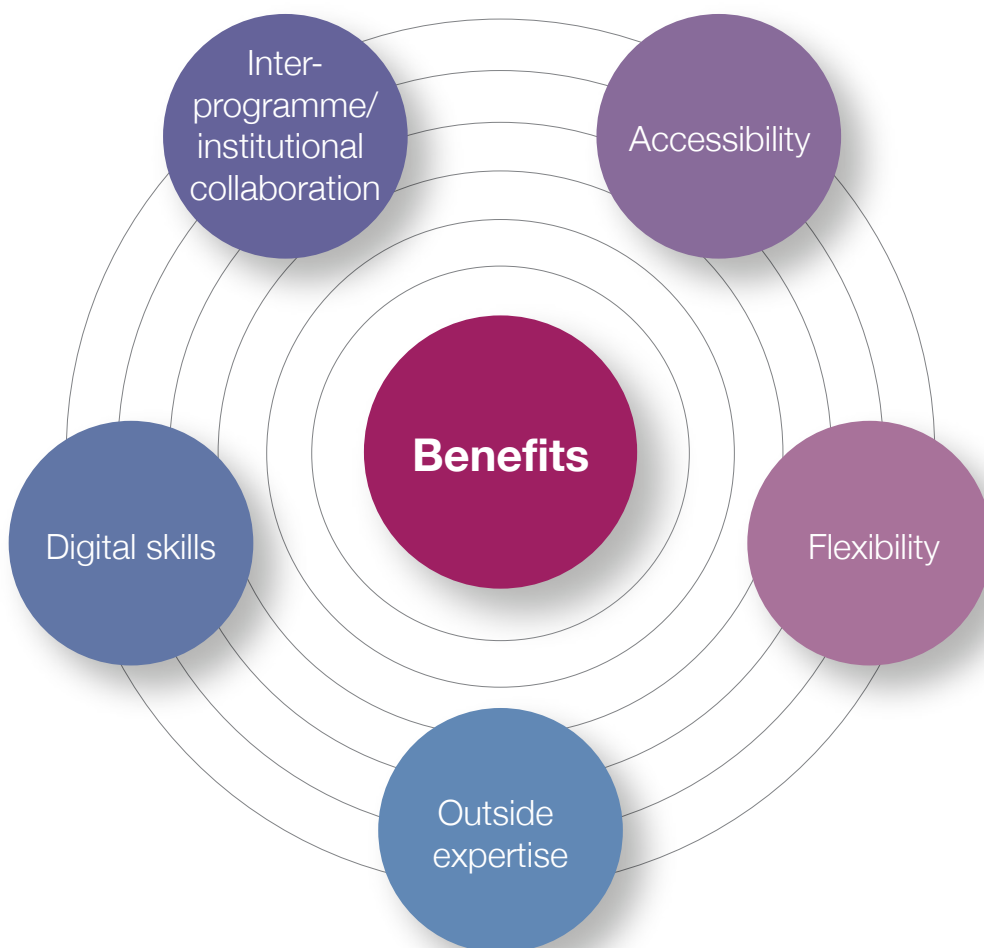
Reflecting on their experiences of the period of emergency online teaching and learning, participants readily acknowledged its impact on our understanding and awareness of the potential role of digital technologies in higher education. A common theme that emerged in this section of the discussion was the potential of digital technologies to increase flexibility and accessibility: allowing the University to attract students traditionally unable to attend, widen audiences to not only enhance enrolment but also broaden engagement with the public and other potential stakeholders. As an institution with high numbers of commuters, it was recognised that digital technologies can potentially overcome barriers to participation for our current students. It was noted that the high uptake of virtual consultations in comparison to traditional physical ones, is a sign of the affordances of these technologies.

Another important benefit of digital technologies cited by the participants was increased opportunities to bring various expertise into the classroom, making it easier for guest academics and others to engage with students. This extends beyond Ireland and also offers the opportunity for collaboration between programmes/modules.

Some final but key discussion points were: firstly, the role of digital technologies in enhancing teaching. The use of blended and flipped classrooms was appreciated as adding a new pedological tool for many. However, while online teaching was generally considered useful for teaching skills, it was deemed less so for transmitting disciplinary knowledge. A significant portion of participants commented on the potential of this type of teaching to enhance digital skills, particularly given the present focus on their role in the workplace. Thus, the discussion reflected the benefits envisaged by many including the National Forum for Teaching and Learning's focus on building digital capacity (National Forum, 2018). Despite the strong sense that digital technologies offered many affordances and a positive attitude to their use, the participants also addressed a number of existing limitations that emerged during the period of emergency online teaching and learning.

# Challenges

**Figure 2.** Challenges



As already highlighted in the findings of the INDEx Survey (National Forum, 2020), a significant concern amongst participants was access to and difficulties with computers and bandwidth for students. Participants noted that even with the laptop loan scheme inequalities were prevalent.

Challenges highlighted by participants included not only of a lack of appropriate computers or poor internet due to using mobile phones to access classes, but also the physical surroundings of students. In particular, cramped accommodation interfered with students' ability to engage with and participate in classes. There was also a strong impression that the lack of face-to-face teaching and support was a strong hinderance to Access students.

A report from AHEAD (2020), has indicated that the wide range of experiences of students included strongly positive but also negative experiences. A better understanding of their requirements for successful online and blended learning will be essential as we move out of the pandemic.

The fully online teaching mode in particular raised concerns about engagement: while a strong argument has been progressed for the use of asynchronous teaching resources to increase flexibility and in turn engagement, many felt this was not the case, with poor interaction with asynchronous material being noted. Added to this student-student and student-staff interaction was impacted by online teaching with difficulties noted in the use of breakout rooms to encourage this. The need to move from a 'lecturing' mode to facilitation to enhance interaction also raised issues around time pressures.

# Meeting the challenges

**Figure 3.** Meeting the challenges
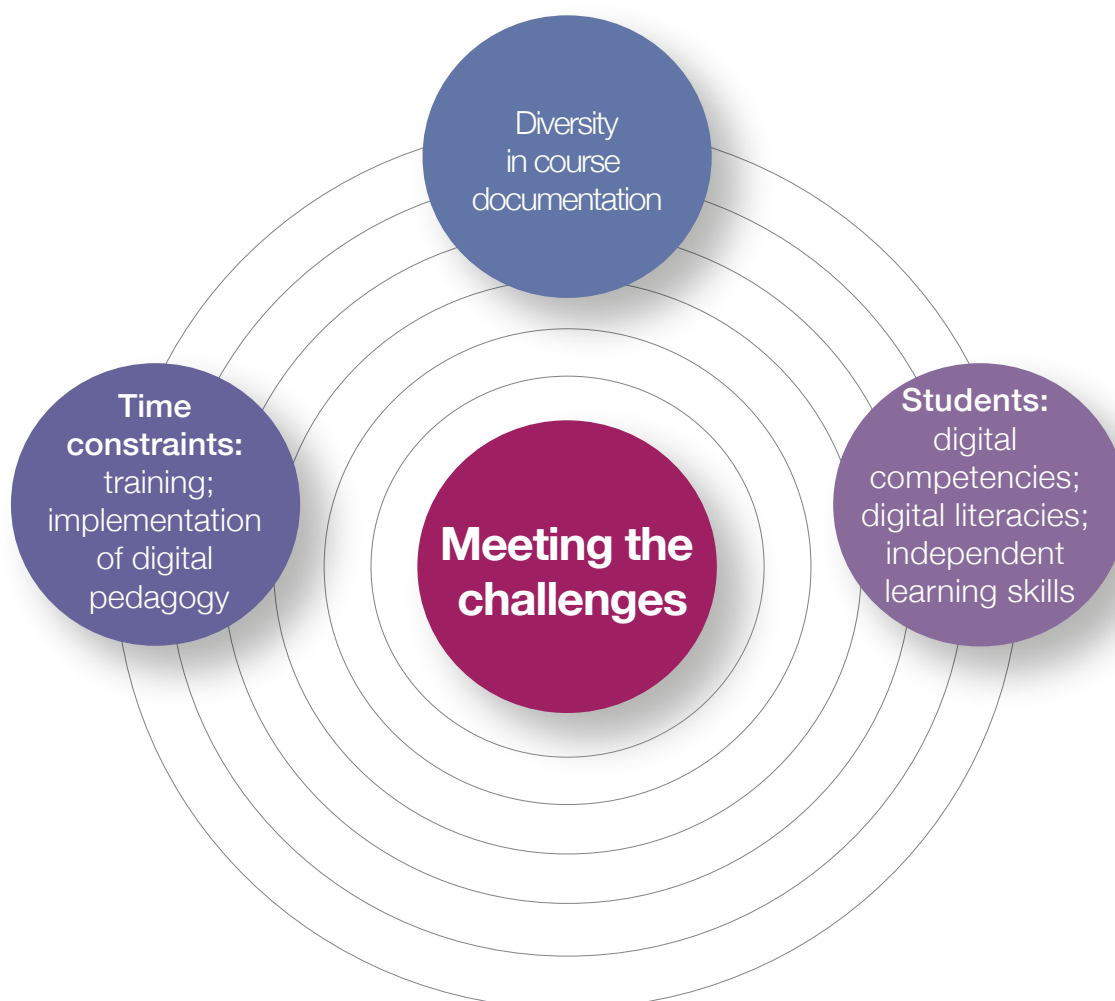


Having reflected on their past experiences, participants were then asked how we as a university community could best utilise and support the use of digital technologies for teaching, learning and assessment. This raised a number of issues that we need to address to ensure the successful implementation of a digital teaching and learning strategy.

Staff felt that they needed enhanced training opportunities, which extend past purely learning about new technologies to the pedagogies behind their use.

MU offers training in specific digital technologies for teaching (for example Microsoft Teams, Moodle, Padlet and others) and a 10-credit CPD course in digital pedagogy, which is also part of a Post-Graduate Diploma in Higher Education Teaching, Learning and Assessment. However, finding time to engage with these and implement what is learnt was a significant constraint.

An even more pressing need that has emerged is that students lack the necessary skills to engage in online learning. Such training needs to include technologies used in their course but also a greater awareness of course requirements, expectations and the personal management skills to meet these in an online setting. Central to this is the need for strong curriculum alignment to ensure that these skills are learnt at the appropriate time and developed over the course of an academic programme, ensuring that students have the appropriate skills for their academic studies as well as the workplace. As part of the Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning in Irish Universities (EDTL) project MU is seeking to establish how best to support students to learn online and develop their digital literacies. Finally, the development of best practice in course design/layout will further enhance accessibility and engagement.

In addition to the development of human capital, there is also a requirement to improve the physical infrastructure to realise the digital transformation. This includes an expanded laptop scheme and a reimagining of the University Campus to include digitally enhanced classrooms and lecture halls (that allow for group collaboration) and student spaces to engage with digital resources outside of class, particularly on days when they are expected to engage in physical and online learning.

# Looking to the future

**Figure 4.** Looking to the future

Communication

Developing best practice

Collaboration

Looking to the future

Bottom-up approach

Further research

Centrality of staff and students

Having addressed the benefits and challenges of utilising digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment, the group also sought to set an agenda for future exploration of this space. This led to several recommendations as to possible future actions. In particular, the participants felt that while we have learnt much during the pandemic, we are only beginning our journey and this must be a collaborative one where we identify the reasons for using technology and not just default to it. Thus, we must recognise that what we don't know dwarfs what we do. As we explore the potential of digital technologies, the student experience and voice must be central to these discussions.

The next step should involve test modules and programmes to allow for the development of best practice in course design. These have been developed within some schools at Maynooth and future work will build on these efforts. This will aid staff in developing their own modules and programmes by providing clarity as to why we use technology and the impact this has on learning and student engagement and satisfaction.

The final and perhaps most significant point made was that academic, teaching support and administrative staff must be central to these discussions and developments. With their involvement we can develop appropriate policies, pedagogy-led decisions on the uses of particular technologies and also the enthusiasm needed for success.

# Conclusions

This report has laid out some of the central challenges and opportunities of digital technologies in teaching and learning as seen by those who teach at Maynooth University. While staff are excited by the affordances of digital technologies to enhance engagement, increase flexibility and widen participation, there is also a wealth of knowledge as to the barriers to its success.

The paper demonstrates that collegiality can provide an important tool in universities' efforts to overcome these barriers and advance the digital agenda. As was witnessed in the World Café event, the exchange of ideas across disciplines enhanced the conversation and this was drawn upon by participants in their proposed solutions. These were not siloed by discipline but rather sought to use sample modules and other activities from across the university to develop a code of best practice to allow all staff to benefit from these experiences.

Central to all of this is knowledge exchange. Thus, ongoing engagement with staff and students is central to the development of policies and practices that will enhance teaching, learning and assessment. This will enhance the student experience, enable staff to further their mission to deliver a world-class education and establish Maynooth as a national leader in the use of digital pedagogy.

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