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## A reflection on evolving student support in a post-pandemic higher education environment

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### Keywords

COVID-19;  
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part-time students;  
student academic support.

### Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on many facets of education and the education experience. This paper seeks to understand how it impacted the support in place for part-time, mature students studying at UCD College of Business. The concepts of learner-centredness and student engagement are explored in order to ask the question 'How has the model of part-time student support provision evolved since the COVID-19 pandemic?'. The Dowling and Ryan (2007) model of student support was used as a heuristic to look at what principle changes are evident in the post-COVID19 environment. This case study demonstrates that the model of part-time student support has evolved since the Dowling and Ryan (2007) model as a result of changing student needs, the external pressures due to the pandemic, and the modes of provision now available to students. In particular, the proliferation of technology has changed the way students ultimately engage with their programme of study. Four central tenets of student support for part-time mature students were identified, namely: 1) Day to day support and use of technology; 2) Feedback and learner progress; 3) Skills Development and 4) Orientation and learner integration. Looking to the future, technology and learner support are fundamental to understanding and achieving learner-centred and engaging student support models. This paper's reflection on the part-time student experience and how learner support might have been reshaped as a result of the pandemic will hopefully help to influence and shape policy-making in higher education and determine how practitioners provide support for part-time students. It also suggests the current concept of learner-centredness might also be expanded upon.

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic instigated a major change in programme provision for higher education institutions around the world. This paper intends to review the impact of the pandemic on the student support provision for University College Dublin's (UCD) Diploma in Business Studies (DBS) programme for part-time, mature students and how it might inform practice into the future. This programme was acknowledged previously as a programme with a robust support framework and a learner centred approach (Dowling & Ryan, 2007). When first reviewed in 2007, the DBS supports were built upon the five pillars of personal tutors, feedback, tailored induction, and learner integration, study skills development, and day-to-day support. The discussion here offers a reflection on the learnings of programme provision, particularly during the COVID-19 period, and how they now might shape student provision in the future. To best understand the needs of students, the concepts of academic engagement and learner-centredness are explored in order to consider the future of student support in a post-pandemic education environment at UCD. The paper seeks to address the question: How has the model of part-time student support provision evolved since the COVID-19 pandemic?

The reflection on learner support and learner-centredness is premised upon the case study at UCD during the period 2020-2022 and how the model of student support adapted to the needs of students during the COVID-19 period. The paper takes a reflective approach to the change in practices during this timeframe. The programme which is the focus of the case was the DBS programme for mature students. These students had unique needs as they were mostly working full time and studying part-time during the pandemic period. The exploration of the case study draws on on-site observations and illustrative materials, including programme resources, student online fora meetings, and evaluations, as well as the programme's website ([www.ucd.ie/bbs](http://www.ucd.ie/bbs)) and student surveys.

## Background and literature review

### The context of COVID-19

This study is significant as it looks at the needs of a non-traditional set of students and how a programme of study responded to supporting them as the pandemic impacted their studies. Dowling and Ryan (2007) had previously suggested a model of student support. This paper's study is relevant not only by way of recording the impact of the pandemic on a non-traditional cohort but also the fact that the needs and expectations of students have altered during the period, suggesting policy and practice need to respond to these changing needs and expectations. The Dowling and Ryan model set out in the literature review is revisited by the author based on the experience of the students in the DBS programme.

The year 2020 brought one of the biggest global challenges to the provision of higher education with the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic was the catalyst for most higher

education institutions (HEIs) to progress quickly to blended, digital, and hybrid models of teaching (Crawford et al., 2020). Although for some, this was not new, the accelerated pace with which online and remote delivery was implemented was a steep learning curve for many educators (Colasante et al., 2020).

The move to online provision by higher education globally has been well documented in the literature (Gopal et al., 2021; Pillai et al., 2021; Chakraborty et al., 2021). The additional stress and anxiety experienced by students as a result of the pandemic are also well documented (Fitzgerald & Konrad, 2020; Monzan & Mesa, 2020). While the move to a full online provision in order to allow students to continue their studies was regarded as flexible but stressful (Amameh et al., 2021), the demands of the COVID-19 situation on part-time students who work full-time and have additional home-schooling, caring and work responsibilities were disruptive.

This paper widens the discussion beyond just online provision to review the broadened student support for part-time students and how it has altered as a result of the pandemic. This discussion is intended as an opportunity to reflect on how the pandemic has helped to shape that support and, more importantly, to explore how we can learn from the experience to move to a more student-centred approach in the post-pandemic environment. It allows for contemplation on how institutions support academic engagement and reflection upon learner-centredness in this post-pandemic education landscape. The concepts of academic engagement and learner-centredness are two important concepts reviewed here, before the discussion of the key elements of student support is outlined.

### Academic engagement and learner-centredness

The literature demonstrates that student success is often linked with academic engagement (Kahu et al., 2019; Senior et al., 2018). The concept of learner-centredness is premised upon the outlook and nurturing of the general learning environment with the needs of the student (or learner!) to learn as being paramount. Particularly when working with a mature student cohort, as in this case, the non-traditional student is not perceived to have a 'lesser' set of skills, but rather just a different set of skills. This concept of learner-centredness is explored again below.

To understand the idea of learner-centredness, we also need to understand the context that builds a successful environment for strong academic engagement. As mentioned above, part-time learners had a particularly unique experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such part-time students would be considered 'non-traditional' learners. In the last two decades, many 'traditional' HEIs have been attempting to grow the engagement of 'non-traditional' learners, including part-time students (Dowling & Ryan, 2007). To continue to successfully foster that academic engagement, it is important to understand the needs of part-time students. That understanding will influence how institutions attract, manage and support students as they embark on, and successfully complete, their studies.

Kim et al. (2019, p. 8) define students' academic engagement as "commitment to or effortful involvement in the context of academic learning throughout a student's entire school experience". Skinner and Pitzer (2012) outline academic engagement as the desire to actively participate in classroom and academic activities. Such academic engagement is deemed to be an effective signal of the quality of students' outcomes and learning experience (Redmond et al., 2018). The concept of academic engagement is very closely aligned with student success. Students who are successful with their studies tend to be engaged academically. Kahu et al. (2019) highlight the importance of exploring the immediate issue that individual students may be grappling with, but also the wider context of university learning and the range of factors, both internal and external to the university, which may be influencing how students successfully engage with their programme of study. Part-time student engagement with their programme of study was set against a backdrop of not just a change in their work arrangements but also may have included caring for young children when childcare facilities closed, home-schooling children, and caring responsibilities for older family members and neighbours. All of these pressures impact the delicate relationship supporting their part-time study and, therefore, the concept of academic engagement as defined above.

Understanding the pressures that affect part-time students' academic engagement, particularly during the pandemic, is directly linked to creating a learner-centred experience. Previous research emphasises the need for both academic and non-academic support, as well as technology to facilitate the progress of more flexible, personalised, and interactive learning environments that need novel ways of providing learning support for open and distance students (Sánchez-Elvira Paniagua & Simpson, 2018). Tait (2000) conceptualises learner support and how system change to accommodate the needs of these part-time learners must be acknowledged with the learner as the starting point. As a result, Tait (2000) recommends that course design, assessment, teaching methods, and the general learning environment must be reviewed with both the learner and their learning in mind. Crimmins (2020, p. 380) outlines that "learner-centredness is founded upon the concept that learners considered non-traditional do not have a 'deficit' identity or situation, or a 'lesser' set of skills, knowledges, or social and cultural capital but rather possess a different situation and set of capabilities from those considered traditional learners". Therefore, learner-centredness should incorporate the knowledge, interests, and preferred ways of learning in higher education of underrepresented groups. It is not a deficit of knowledge, it is just a different situation and set of complexities. It is important to consider the needs of the part-time, mature learner in designing the assessment, mode of delivery, and the learning environment.

### **Learner support frameworks**

In 2007, Dowling and Ryan explored the student supports for the Diploma in Business Studies Part-Time at UCD. Since 2007, it remains a useful framework to look at both the provisions for learner-centredness and, thereby, the academic engagement of a diverse student cohort. The

student profile has remained constant during that time (see programme overview section below for student demographic overview). There were five pillars of effective student support suggested (Dowling & Ryan, 2007, p. 85):

- a) Day-to-day support: Students can contact or meet with a qualified academic member of staff who can discuss their study queries.
- b) Feedback and learner progress: Provision of student feedback on assessment and active monitoring of student progress during a study term.
- c) Study skills development: Accredited academic skills modules to support students in developing academic skills needed at the tertiary level
- d) Induction and learner integration: A tailored orientation programme to support students as they socialise and understand the expectations at the tertiary level.
- e) Personal Tutors – A dedicated staff member who would provide the day-to-day support outlined above.

In order to consider learner-centredness in a post-pandemic world, we look at the specific case of the DBS programme Part-Time at UCD and how this framework has adjusted to a post-pandemic environment.

### **Methodology**

This paper seeks to address the research question 'How has the model of part-time student support provision evolved since the COVID-19 pandemic?' based on the case of a part-time diploma programme offered by UCD College of Business. A previous paper on this programme and its follow on degree programme of the Bachelor of Business Studies programme was previously undertaken by Dowling and Ryan (2007). A case study methodology was selected for this review as it allowed for an in-depth investigation into learner-centredness and, therefore, academic engagement. The discussion here makes for a suitable case study drawing on on-site observations and illustrative materials (Yin, 1981), including programme materials, student for a, and evaluations, as well as the programme's website ([www.ucd.ie/bbs](http://www.ucd.ie/bbs)) and student surveys. Using these resources and examining practices over the last two years, allows for the opportunity for productive reflection. Boud et al. (2006) propose the concept of "productive reflection" to address some of the complexities and some of the uncertainties that organisations encounter. Cressey (2006) outlines the advance of the concept of embedded collective reflection, which is associated with a progression from problem-solving within an organisation's setting, overseen by standardisation and control, to a greater emphasis on creativity and innovation through "reflective participation" in the workplace. The three authors here are directly involved in the delivery of the

programme and have taken this case as an opportunity for reflective participation in the programme's development.

## **The case study: re-exploring the UCD support framework for student part-time provision**

### ***Programme overview***

The DBS Part-Time was launched in 1996, offering part-time students an accessible mode to return to education. After the first two years of study, students are awarded a DBS. Most students continue into the third and fourth years of the programme and are awarded a Bachelor of Business Studies (BBS) on successful completion of four years of study.

There are two entry routes for the programme. The first, and most common, is based on mature years (23 years of age), life experience, and academic aptitude. Students over 21 years of age, but under the threshold for mature years entry may join based on matriculation. Most students are in their '30s and '40s. The average age from the academic year 2021/22 was 33 years old. Students come from a very broad demographic, cultural, and professional background. Generally, they do not have any tertiary academic qualifications and are seeking a broad degree in business to allow them to prosper in either the field that they are in or move on to an entirely different career path. The programme is managed by the UCD Centre for Distance Learning (CDL), established in 2001 to manage the UCD College of Business portfolio of overseas and domestic part-time programmes. The delivery structure of the programme appeals to this diverse cohort. Students attend three weekends on campus per trimester (six in total per academic year), concurrently undertaking three five-credit modules at the Diploma level, and ten-credit modules at Bachelor level each trimester. The remainder of their studies is undertaken at home. Another key factor in the success of the DBS stage of the programme is two tailored academic skills modules that are offered in the first year. The CDL is cognisant that many students on the programme have not been in formal education for many years – most of whom have no tertiary level education experience at all. Therefore, students take part in the *Skills for Higher Education* module in the first trimester and the *Academic and Transferable Skills* module in their second trimester. These modules are specifically designed with the mature part-time learner at the centre of the learning environment, the assessment, and the teaching delivery. Thus, this learner group and programme make for a particularly interesting cohort to review the impact of COVID-19, their academic engagement, and the need for learner-centeredness.

### ***UCD's immediate reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic***

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a sudden change in how tertiary education was delivered across the globe. In the context of the DBS, Friday, 13th March, 2020 had been scheduled to be a teaching weekend. While all classes were initially cancelled, an agile approach was immediately adopted and each individual lecturer was

canvassed to indicate their chosen date and mode of delivery for the content that had been planned to be delivered that weekend. As a business school, the approach was informed by agile project management (i.e. an approach underpinned by four key values: producing bespoke products, responding to uncertainty and change, a fusion of disparate technologies, and both intra-enterprise and inter-enterprise integration (Project Management Journal, 2013). The agile approach is well embedded within the philosophy of the College. With the ongoing dynamic nature of the COVID-19 situation, the agile principles were helpful to inform the approach the programme team adopted around collaboration with customers (i.e. students here), regular reflections on the approach taken, providing regular updates on technology (e.g. such as online classroom deliveries) and teams maintain a reasonable and repeatable speed in the dynamic environment.

Within two weeks, all content that had been planned to be delivered in person on 13th and 14th March had been delivered online utilising a variety of platforms. Blackboard Collaborate Ultra proved to be the most common platform used for live webinar delivery as it was integrated into UCD's Virtual Learning Environment, Brightspace. Asynchronous content was also created, mainly in the form of narrated PowerPoint slides.

CDL, as a result of their programme management in China and South East Asia, had a range of resources already available such as video tutorials on how best to use Blackboard Collaborate Ultra in the UCD teaching context, with accompanying guidebooks, and template study guides for online provision of modules. These study guides provide a full overview of the module for students including weekly readings, assessment guides, and topic overviews. When the pandemic forced the closure of campuses all over the world, these resources proved invaluable for both the CDL's overseas programmes and, from March 2020, the DBS programme.

By the final teaching weekend of the academic year in April 2020, the intervening weeks had given lecturers greater experience in the online space, and they were far more comfortable in integrating question and answer sessions, and more bespoke content intended to reflect the virtual setting, as opposed to replicating face-to-face teaching in the online space which was more of a trend with March 2020 online delivery. Over the summer of 2020, a greater proliferation of Zoom for video conferencing solutions saw it become the platform of choice for the 2020/21 Academic Year.

### **Discussion: the case in action**

We will now reflect on the five pillars of student support as outlined by Dowling and Ryan (2007) in light of learner-centredness and how the needs of learners may have changed post-pandemic.

Day-to-day support: the demands of part-time study during COVID-19 and the constraints afterwards on students demonstrated the pivotal need for them to have access to



daily support. The preference for this support has moved to online meetings and online accessibility for individual discussions with staff. In the 2007 version of the framework, this was about the personal tutor. This 2022 framework sees this role reimaged into a more holistic programme support role. The focus of this support is on student accessibility to the programme manager so that they can get clear guidance on the day-to-day running of classes, the content of the academic material, the demands of balancing study with life commitments, and the shift to support with technology. Students report the value of having someone who knows their name, knows their situation, and provides a social connection with the university:

“Overall, I felt the support from the programme manager was exceptional and in the context of returning to education was invaluable” (DBS Student Survey, May 2022).

Connection is even more important as the students only have class on campus once a month. Some students may not have come to campus at all if they availed of online class provision during the COVID-19 period. Classes are now largely recorded and/or streamed where possible, to allow for students to review class material or view it after a session, should a student miss it through work requirements, attendance preference during COVID-19, or personal demands:

“I liked how online classes were recorded. If there was any doubt or confusion on a topic, re-watching allowed another opportunity for understanding” (DBS and BBS Student Survey, December 2021).

The prominence of technology now to support students is valuable, but it can potentially disconnect the student from the university. On-campus attendance at the weekends is critical and most students have indicated a preference for this. However, the CDL also acknowledges the opportunities for greater learning and revision that recorded classes afford. Feedback and learner progress: the provision of student feedback on assessment and active monitoring of student progress remains of crucial importance. The two academic skills modules have re-designed the assessment to make it more accessible. The larger assessment elements were replaced with smaller components that allow for earlier and more regular feedback to students. For these modules, students get very detailed individual feedback to support the acquisition and development of relevant skills. This feedback provides insight to the programme staff on the level of skills development or academic ability in the class and where gaps might lie. It also helps to shape the modules and the levels of day-to-day individual or collective student support. The reference to feedback here also acknowledges the opportunities for students to give feedback on the programme such as student/staff fora or student surveys

Study skills development: the skills modules have shifted focus from more than just study skills development to include a more outward-focused approach on both academic and professional skills. The first trimester looks at key academic skills e.g. note taking, essay writing, time management, referencing, etc. In the second trimester, the focus has

expanded to support growth within the programme, as well as career and professional development outside of the programme.

A further aspect of skills development that falls outside of the curriculum and for which demand grew during the COVID-19 period is the need to foster and support student wellbeing. Initiatives around student-focused wellbeing workshops, student mindfulness, self-care, and meditation have come to the fore and are being embedded into the additional programme experience to support part-time learners as they balance the demands of part-time study with other commitments. These have taken the structure of workshops, invited speakers, and the digital app Silvercloud which gives students access to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy programmes.

Induction and learner integration: an important pillar for student support remains the orientation programme as students become accustomed to the programme. The format has been reworked to ensure the introduction to programme concepts and academic skills is layered carefully on a just-in-time basis as students face new challenges. This ensures the on-campus orientation is about the development of key relationships and critical study kick-off information, such as how to study, how to take a set of meaningful study notes, and what academic writing looks like. In addition to this, there is an understanding that digital competence is also of importance to a student's programme experience. Key tools such as Brightspace, the UCD virtual learning environment, the UCD student registration system, and the applications for assessment presentations such as Word, PowerPoint, etc, are introduced on a need-to-know basis for the new students. Equally, there are instructions to navigate online teaching spaces such as Zoom, so students are introduced to the functionality and expectations of an online classroom:

I believe the orientation/onboarding process supported me really well during the first weeks of the programme and also prepared me for the months later. In particular, the emails students receive with all recaps for next activities/deadlines/modules' registrations, etc proved to be vital to not get lost in the system during the first months (DBS Year 1 Student Survey, May 2022).

Given the developments outlined above, the 2007 framework has been revised to four central tenets of student support that are suggested as critical in a post-pandemic environment for part-time university students (see Figure 1) below:

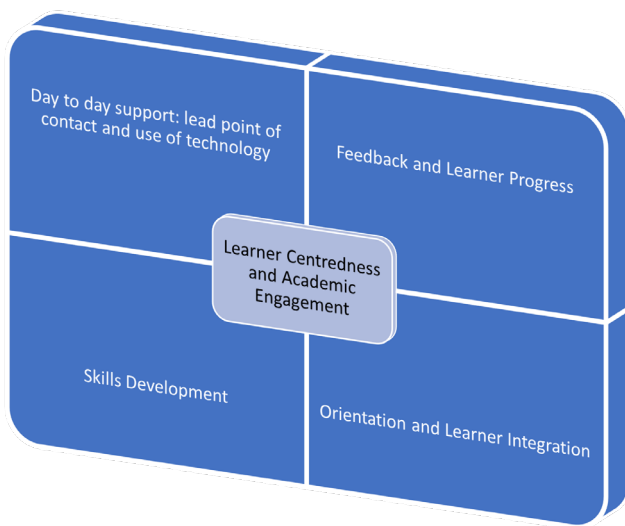


Figure 1: Student supports post pandemic.

## Findings

How has the model of part-time student support provision evolved since the COVID-19 pandemic? It has to be acknowledged that the needs of learners have undoubtedly changed during the COVID-19 period and so too have their expectations. The discussion of practice above suggests a refined model of student supports based on Ryan and Dowling's (2007) original model. This revised framework, 'Evolving Student Supports in a Post-Pandemic Environment', provides a means to frame what some of the learner-centred programme features might be. While the model has been refined, it is clear that the points of student engagement have become more complex in recent years. What remains critical is that a learner-centred approach remains the starting point for the engagement and experience of this learner profile, in keeping with Tait's (2000) concept of learner support (see above).

In the 2022 model outlined, the pillar of 'day-to-day support and use of technology' is defined by the greater use of digital platforms for class provision and module material. Tait (2014) had previously called for reforming student support in the digital age to factor in both internal and external factors to the students and integrating student support with teaching. The virtual learning environment has certainly changed how students engage with their studies. The expectations in terms of the use of technology, particularly the opportunities for streaming or recorded sessions, provide programme teams with a unique opportunity to provide flexible provision. This flexibility brings with it an additional challenge to ensure that students remain engaged with their studies. Samson (2022) demonstrated some early indications that it is no longer the case that students who engage remotely with their studies are less successful. Samson's (2022) study shows that while there is no determinant between student performance and mode of engagement, what is clear is that students welcome flexibility in provision. Consequently, while the use of technology has become greater, it appears the need for student support has also become greater. The 'messy realities of students' engagements with digital technology is acknowledged in the literature and thus how this messiness

means students need additional support (Selwyn, 2016, p. 1006). In this case study, as technology is used more and more, be it in terms of class provision or as a tool for study, the students still seek tangible reassurance and support from the programme team.

A second observation is that the pillar of 'feedback and learner progress' remains at the heart of the learner-centred approach of the programme. Calvanti et al, (2021) completed a systematic literature review that demonstrated the importance of feedback in online provision and, more particularly, automated feedback. The need for feedback for DBS students in this COVID-19 online environment demonstrated the importance of feedback. The skills module feedback and programme evaluations, for example, were important in carving out the more external skill focus for this particular cohort. These feedback mechanisms supported the development of such skill modules, and their evolution is based on the multiple feedback modes outlined above.

A final observation is that learner-centredness as a concept has also informed student orientation and learner integration. The current scope of learner-centredness in the literature, as per Crimmins, above could be expanded to consider these two other aspects for students. The earlier concept of learner-centredness, discussed above, is based upon the development of a learning environment based on student needs. The current focus in the literature does not appear to really include the onboarding of students into the environment or how learners are integrated into the environment. Students can often report information overload at busy orientation times. The use of technology, in this case, Zoom, has facilitated both a decompression of the orientation programme as well as the opportunity to record sessions that can be revisited, as and when needed. This decompression of information at a busy time for students and recognition of the learner-centredness during the onboarding period has not yet been acknowledged in the literature. The orientation also provides an opportunity for that important social engagement amongst not only teaching and programme staff, but also the students and their peers.

In addition, the results of Heidari et al. (2021) indicate that students' digital competence could, directly and indirectly, affect their academic engagement in their programme during the pandemic. As academic material continues to be provided in multiple formats, digital competence remains a consideration. The orientation programme outlined above understands that students will need support not only with the curricular learning of the programme, but also the orientation to the digital skills which will support students in their learning. Taking a learner-centred approach here involved having a baseline of understanding of the skills within the group and working to support students, individually and collectively, to meet programme outcomes around technology. For example, the orientation to the virtual learning environment as a session as well as post-orientation individual sessions helped to support students. Equally supporting students, as an individual or a team, in the preparation of team-based assignments and orienting them to Google Docs (the selected online collaboration tool) and Google Meet. Such support does not revolve only

around technical applications but also the use of tools like Google Teams and Zoom for students to access student support meetings. Pre-COVID-19 students were invited to the university for meetings around not only areas of student support but also of progression, academic integrity, or leave of absence. Since COVID-19, such meetings are available online and more accessible to part-time students who are living often far from the university campus.

The pace of change in higher education is great and has necessitated an evolution of the model of part-time student support, in particular since the COVID-19 pandemic. The change is evident in the needs of students, the external pressures on the environment during the pandemic, and also the modes of provision now available to students. Never before has there been such an opportunity to explore different methods of delivery and student experiences for all student cohorts. This opportunity allows higher education practitioners to really consider learner-centredness and what might work best for diverse student cohorts. These opportunities also coincide with a change in student expectations about how programmes might be provided or supported. In the case study above, there is evidence that there are opportunities to reframe many aspects of the programme experience and student supports as a legacy of the pandemic where face-to-face classes are complimented with additional online supports, assessment becomes less traditional, more transferable, and professional skills are introduced, and the need for support for student wellbeing is recognised.

Student wellbeing has been an area that has grown tremendously, just as the related area of corporate well-being, particularly in the COVID-19 period. The concept of student well-being is not new but did come to the fore during the pandemic (Adams et al., 2000) recognised that student well-being generally refers to a state of psychological, intellectual, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual wellness. More recently, Sun and Shek (2014) suggest student well-being comprises eudaimonia indicators, such as fully functioning and positive development, and hedonic indicators of subjective well-being, such as the presence of positive affect, absence of negative affect, and life satisfaction. As student mindfulness, self-care and mediation have come to the fore in the COVID-19 period, they were embedded by the programme into the additional programme experience to support part-time learners as they balance the demands of part-time study with other commitments. Supports in this regard have taken the structure of workshops with occupational therapists, invited speakers, and the digital app Silvercloud, which gives students access to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy programmes. In 2023, a further focus will be added to look at building resilience within students and providing them with the tangible tools to manage the demands of the part-time student as a mature student.

In looking to the future and how higher education practitioners continue to think about academic engagement and learner-centredness, there are some inevitable considerations that arise. Two are discussed here: technology and learner support. First, this case study has identified the role of technology in all of the pillars described above. On-campus programmes have experienced a new space where technology has

streamed, recorded or added additional online sessions to complement existing face-to-face provision. Students report that they see the value of on-campus delivery, but at the same time really enjoy the flexibility that technology can provide. A possible concern can be that where this flexibility is afforded, it dilutes the on-campus experience for students. While there is no clear solution, this model does suggest that if you consider the needs of your learner and how you wish them to engage academically, you can find a balance between online and face-to-face. For part-time students, the demand to attend on-campus appears strong, but is best leveraged when supported with some online or recorded provision. Additionally, the role of the programme manager in gathering student and other stakeholder feedback in this regarding is central to navigating this terrain.

Second is learner support. Crimmins's (2020) concept of learner-centredness, as already discussed, requires staff and structures that really understand the needs of students and, particular to this case study, the needs of part-time students. As this paper considers the concept of learner-centredness and what will encourage students to engage with their programme, there is a palpable change in the demand for more outward-facing skills from students. The two academic skills for year one students have been repositioned to ensure that external skills and competences are developed in the programme. Students welcome not only the traditional academic skills but also those of intercultural competencies, reflection, mindfulness, interpersonal, and communication skills.

In addition to a more external facing set of skills developed, there is also a place for a focus on student well-being. It is interesting to see in UCD, for the academic year 2021/22 alone, there are now three dedicated modules available to students on this topic across the university and there are a number of other more ad hoc supports available in this field\*. While not traditionally or currently on the curriculum, the feedback to the programme team is that student wellbeing is of increasing importance. This is a result of the COVID-19 situation and the stresses students found themselves under. As things return to normal, there remains an opportunity to locate some programme or extracurricular opportunities to engage with students around their own well-being, being part-time students, and how to mind themselves.

## Conclusion and recommendations

This paper has looked at an earlier model of student support and attempted to review how that model might be reframed as a result of the pandemic. The study was generated using a case study and it is acknowledged that the case study approach may have limited wider discernible learnings for a population, are non-generalizable, and can lack the precision of other research methodology (Yin, 1984). All the same it is useful to record some of the areas of student support evolution which has shaped student expectations at UCD and might inform future policy and practice at the university. While there is an abundance of papers reviewing the change in the practice of higher education institutions during the COVID-19 period, this appears to explore the less acknowledged area of student support and revisits

Dowling and Ryan's (2007) student support model in a post-COVID-19 world.

Some of the student support changes outlined here may well have evolved over time, but the exceptional circumstances of the years 2020 and 2021 provided a catalyst to students and higher education practitioners to reframe the student support needs of part-time business students. The COVID-19 pandemic certainly fuelled the proliferation of technology options and quest for increased flexibility, be that logistical flexibility with location, module flexibility, or spatial flexibility with the completion of the assessment. This ideally will help to build an environment to optimise students' academic engagement with their programme.

Of course, what remains central to the success of the student support model is essentially understanding the learners, their needs, and how this frames both the 'in programme curricular experience' (e.g. modules, classes, and assessment) and the 'out of curriculum experience' (e.g. learner support management, additional talks, workshops, opportunities to develop peer relationships). The revised new model of student support proposed above provides a more contemporary heuristic to consider student support for part-time students. This revised heuristic appears to be a more suitable reflection of the support needed by students at present. It will be exciting to see what the shape of student support will be in over the coming years. Will it be the case that the area of student support becomes technologically driven and accessible to students, or will a preference for more traditional, face-to-face support revert? Is it the case that the current demand for student well-being might be embedded into the curricula of primary and secondary level systems, and less needed at the third level? Regardless of the outcome, what is central is that institutions continue to engage with their student stakeholders and actively their models of support, especially as the student population becomes more disparate and prioritises student support services to ensure a quality student experience and high student completion rates.

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