



UCC Students' Union
Student Feedback on Online Learning
Report (Ver5)
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Contents

1. Abstract
2. Introduction
3. Design
4. Implementation
5. Validation
6. Discussion
7. Future Research
8. Acknowledgments
9. Bibliography
10. Appendix

Abstract

A study was carried out across the student population of University College Cork in October 2020 as a response to the change to online learning necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The results of this study are multi-faceted and explore the range of experiences that students in UCC are living through. It also showcases the high engagement level of the student body in their online learning experience. The study aims to contribute the student perspective to the conversation around online learning, both in the short term while we live through various public health restrictions, and into the future as the format of higher education continues to evolve.

“When everyone in the classroom, teacher and students, recognizes that they are responsible for creating a learning community together, learning is at its most meaningful and useful.”
– bell hooks, *Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom*¹

“It’s just not in any way ideal is it ??”

“Being online in any way prevents classes from being able to have the kind of natural flowing conversation that you can only receive in person- but with the right group of people, you can make the best of those circumstances”

– UCC students²

Introduction

On 31st December 2019, the World Health Organisation first became aware of a “‘viral pneumonia’ in Wuhan, People’s Republic of China.”³ This virus was to go on to cause a global public health pandemic, affecting all areas of society. Third level education in Ireland was in no way immune to the effects of the pandemic. On March 12th 2020, a nationwide lockdown was declared to prevent the spread of Covid-19⁴, necessitating the closure of third level campuses. Learning, teaching and examination moved, over a weekend, online. This was an emergency response to an entirely unprecedented situation. “The recent pivot to remote learning during the pandemic was ad hoc, inconsistent and happened during a time of great emotional upheaval for students”⁵.

As the virus numbers began to decrease during the summer months of 2020⁶, a blended learning approach was being planned in University College Cork. However, as cases began to

¹ hooks, b. (2010). *Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom*. New York, Routledge

² ITEM 7

³ World Health Organisation *Timeline of WHO’s response to COVID-19* Available at <https://www.who.int/news/item/29-06-2020-covidtimeline> [Accessed 26 Nov 2020]

⁴ Merrion Street; Irish Government News Service. *Statement by An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar On measures to tackle Covid-19 Washington, 12 March 2020* Available at https://merriionstreet.ie/en/News-Room/News/Statement_by_An_Taoiseach_Leo_Varadkar_On_measures_to_tackle_Covid-19_Washington_12_March_2020.html [Accessed 27 Nov 2020]

⁵ Kong, S. (2020) Learning to learn from a distance. *Maclean’s*. 2020;133(6): 69-71

⁶ Health Protections Surveillance Centre. *Epidemiology of COVID-19 in Ireland- daily reports, August 2020*. Available at <https://www.hpsc.ie/a->

rise once more in September, a Friday announcement declared that Universities nationwide were to move teaching fully online⁷. This announcement came three days before the already delayed start of term and brought about another rapid pivot into online delivery. Teaching staff who had carefully spend the summer months planning a mix of online and face-to-face delivery now had to translate their content fully online.

The change to online learning has meant students and staff are exploring new ways to best deliver the standard of teaching expected in UCC. Of course, this is an issue faced by all the higher education institutions worldwide who have had to move delivery online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet there is a real scarcity of research on how students themselves experience online learning in 2020.

Research so far has mostly focused on students pre-Covid who chose to study a blended or fully online course (e.g. Seiver, J.G., & Troja, A (2014).⁸). The difference in the current situation of course, is that the move to online in UCC was a necessary reaction, rather than a measured decision. There have also been a limited amount of studies about students' opinions to the move to online learning in Spring of 2020, during the initial lockdown. Although a slightly different context to the one covered in this study, these findings are extremely valuable for comparison purposes (Maynooth Students' Union⁹, Besser, A., Flett, G.L., & Zeigler-Hill, V. (2020)¹⁰ & Puljak, L., Čivljak, M., Haramina, A. et al. (2020)¹¹).

There is no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic has had negative impacts on students worldwide. "Students must try to maintain their concentration on learning despite it being difficult to do so. The learning and achievements of students are typically underscored by their goals and goal orientations, yet it is not easy to maintain a focus on achievement goals when life issues have become predominant."¹² In a study of 1,217 Israeli students, with a mean age of 27.42, "participants reported significantly higher levels of stress and isolation as well as negative mood in synchronous online learning experience compared to their experience in previous traditional face-to face learning...Moreover, they reported significantly lower levels of positive mood, relatedness, concentration and focus, motivation, and performance"¹³.¹³ These students would have already dealt with incredibly harrowing experiences¹⁴ and yet the effects of the pandemic are so intense as to elicit this response.

[z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/casesinireland/epidemiologyofcovid-19inireland/august2020/](https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/all-third-level-colleges-moved-to-level-3-most-tuition-moved-online-1.4364731)

[Accessed 26 Nov 2020]

⁷ McGee, H. (2020) All third level colleges moved to Level 3, most tuition moved online *The Irish Times*, 25 Sept 2020, Available at <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/all-third-level-colleges-moved-to-level-3-most-tuition-moved-online-1.4364731> [Accessed 26 Nov 2020]

⁸ Seiver, J.G., & Troja, A (2014). Satisfaction and success in online learning as a function of the needs for affiliation, autonomy, and mastery. *Distance Education*, 35, 90-105.

⁹ Maynooth Students' Union (2020) *Annual Survey of Student Opinion. COVID-19 Questions Report*. Available at https://www.msu.ie/asset/News/6013/MSU_COVID19_Survey_Report.pdf [Accessed 26 Nov 2020]

¹⁰ Besser, A., Flett, G.L., & Zeigler-Hill, V. (2020). Adaptability to a Sudden Transition to Online Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Understanding the Challenges for Students. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*. Advance online publication <http://dx.doi/10.1037/stl0000198>

¹¹ Puljak, L., Čivljak, M., Haramina, A. et al. (2020) Attitudes and concerns of undergraduate university health sciences students in Croatia regarding complete switch to e-learning during COVID-19 pandemic: a survey. *BMC Med Educ* 20, 416

¹² Besser, A., Flett, G.L., & Zeigler-Hill, V. (2020).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

It has been recorded that the Covid-19 pandemic has had an inordinate effect on lower socio-economic groups, and students of this status have also suffered disproportionately. Indeed, overall “financial considerations would almost certainly add to the challenges facing many students.”¹⁵

As a response to this, within the UCC context, research was undertaken consisting of a three phase study which aimed at gauging students’ experiences of online learning 4 weeks into Semester 1 of the 2020/21 academic year in order to provide practical advice to staff in UCC. This study took place over two weeks from Monday 19th October until Tuesday 3rd November 2020 with over 6,500 individual interactions¹⁶ on the various platforms, spanning four colleges of the University.

Puljak, Čivljak, Haramina, et al. say that “Feedback provided by students can be used to adjust online teaching to learner realities”¹⁷, but not only *can* student feedback be used, it *must* be used “to inform institutional and programme management, as well as national policy.”¹⁸ In the words of Paulo Freire, “to alienate humans from their own decision making is to change them into objects.”¹⁹ The human element of higher education has never been more important than right now.

The three phases in the study are as follows;

- | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Phase 1, Design | a workshop with Student Academic Representatives to inform the survey questions |
| Phase 2, Implementation | a University-wide nine-question survey on the student experience of online learning |
| Phase 3, Validation | an Instagram survey interrogating further five key findings from the nine-question survey |

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ ITEM 5

¹⁷ Puljak, L., Čivljak, M., Haramina, (2020).

¹⁸ Department of Education and Skills (2019). National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 Available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/072a65-national-strategy-for-higher-education-to-2030/> [Accessed 27 Nov 2020]

¹⁹ Freire, P., (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum

Phase 1, Design

As the Education Officer for UCC's Students' Union 2020/21, I was responsible for representing the views and opinions of the 22,000 students²⁰ learning online. I was also responsible for electing, training and guiding 388 academic reps. The aim of this phase is to inform questions to be included in the Phase Two survey, which will gather student feedback on experiences of online learning during Semester One.

Method

All academic representatives from the Colleges of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Science, Business and Law, and Science, Engineering and Food Science who attended their college's academic rep training welcome was included in these workshops. As representatives for their class, it was felt that these reps were an appropriate group to voice the main issues facing students with respect to online learning. The College of Medicine and Health were not included purely because their training fell on the next Saturday due to scheduling issues with the reps being on placement mid-week. However, discussions with them proved the majority of the points made by the other three College were relevant with Medicine and Health also.

After the training element of each session was completed on Monday 19th October 2020, I invited the reps to talk about any issues their class was having with online learning, the problems they faced, what could be improved and so on. I lead with some inviting questions, for example, 'Do you find breakout rooms work for your classes?' 'Are you distracted more often if you are studying from home?' amongst others. Groups began a lively discussion after one or two such prompts.

The session was held via Zoom so the hands up and chat functions were used extensively. I noted down all points made during the live conversation and read through the chat after the session had ended to add to my written notes.

Between 65-75 reps attended each of the first three sessions, although not all participated in the conversation. A further 35 attended the Medicine and Health rep training welcome on Saturday 24th October.

Main issues raised in Phase One

The main issues highlighted across all colleges included a strong feeling of overwhelm, due to lecturers giving too much content and not sticking to the timetable. Students also felt that they were missing the opportunity for informal interaction with their lecturers, like they would have had at the end of an in-person class. Finally, students also expressed frustration at internet and technology issues, both on the part of the lecturer and their fellow classmates.

Conclusions and Actions

Based on these results, a 19 question survey²¹ was constructed to explore the degree to which these issues were prevalent across the wider student population, and also to get feedback on other topics around online learning. Collaboration with the SU President, Mr. Naoise Crowley, resulted in this being refined to a nine question survey²² in order to increase

²⁰ ITEM 9

²¹ ITEM 1

²² ITEM 2

completion rates while still covering the main issues highlighted by the academic reps. Terms such as ‘synchronous’ and ‘asynchronous’ were omitted in accordance with plain language advice, in order not to deter students and also to make sure there was no confusion, muddling up the results. ‘Online Live’ and ‘Online Pre-recorded’ were used instead, mirroring the terms used by the reps during the phase one workshops.

Phase Two, Implementation

The aim of this research is to inform staff in UCC on what students find most and least effective about learning online. Some guiding points will be given to staff to help them engage with the findings.

Method

The entire student population²³ was included in this survey, as the change to online learning has affected every student in UCC.

A nine question survey²⁴ was drawn up from the questions created in Phase One through a Google Form. Each respondent had to sign in with their UCC umail email to access the survey, and every umail could only access the survey once. All replies were anonymous, and the email address of myself, the SU Education Officer (education@uccsu.ie), was given at the start and upon completion of the survey, for anyone who had issues or who wanted to elaborate their point through that medium. Participation was voluntary and participants were aware that they could withdraw from the survey at any time.

The population was initially sent the survey by the SU President, through an all student email on the 21st of October 2020, during the 4th teaching week of the first semester. The survey was also posted three times onto the SU Instagram story²⁵ at intervals during the following seven days. The survey link was shared twice in WhatsApp groups containing academic representatives from each of the four colleges in UCC, with the encouragement to share among their class groups. The survey was kept live until 5pm on Thursday 29th October.

A total of 2049 students responded to the survey representing a response rate of over 9% of the entire student body in UCC²⁶.

Results

The raw data from this survey was transferred to an Excel document and analysis performed on the quantitative data using that tool.

The key findings are as follows;

²³ ITEM 9

²⁴ ITEM 2

²⁵ University College Cork Students’ Union Instagram. Available at <https://www.instagram.com/uccsu/> [Accessed 26 Nov 2020]

²⁶ ITEM 9

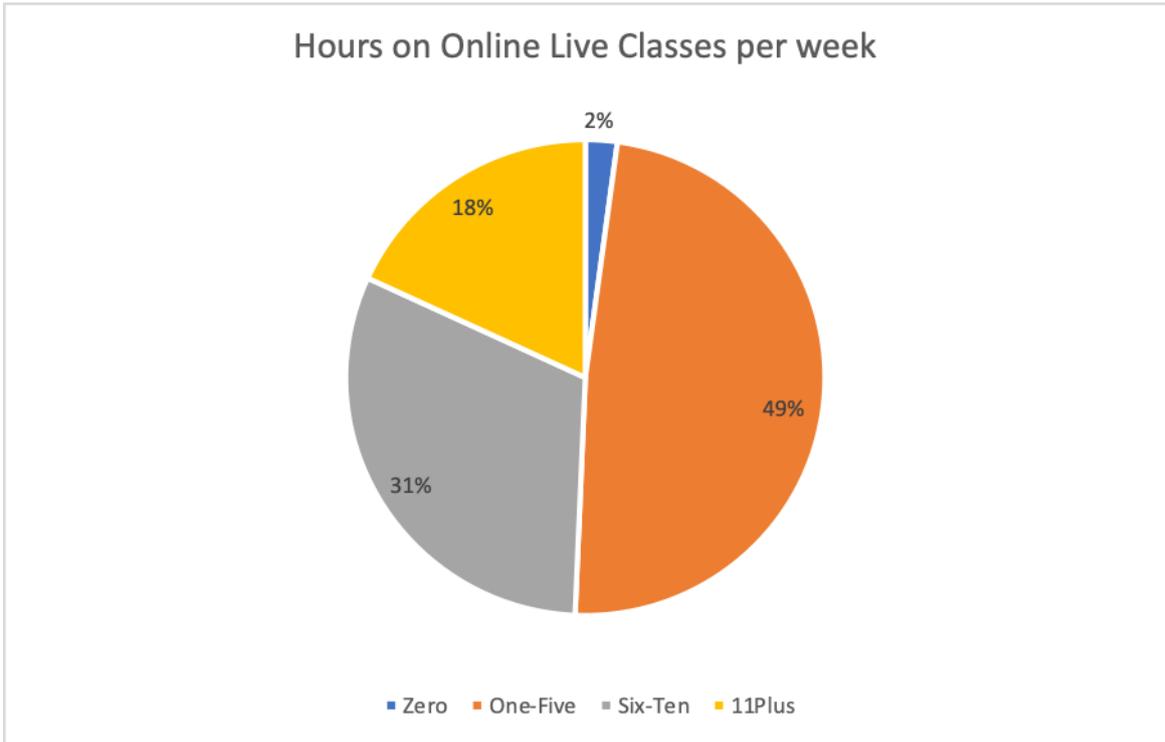


Figure 1 – Q2) How many live online hours do you have per week? (e.g. on Microsoft Teams etc)

As seen in Figure 1, 49% of respondents declared that they had between 1 and 5 hours of online live classes a week, with 2% having no live interactive classes online at all. 18% of respondents had more than 11 hours of live classes a week²⁷.

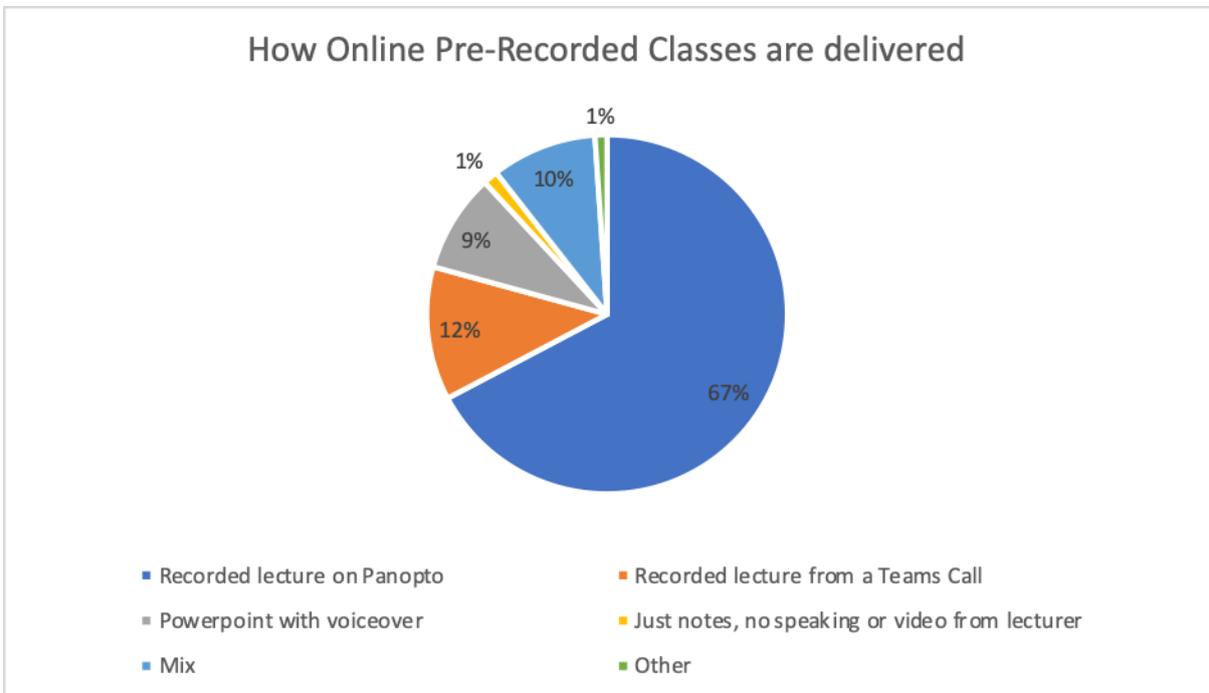


Figure 2 – Q3) What form do your recorded classes take?

²⁷ ITEM 3

Panopto appears to be the format which is used most by teaching staff to deliver pre-recorded lectures (77% as seen in Figure 2) and was also the recommended platform by the University. 10% of students said that they experienced a mix of the four named formats, however it is possible that this proportion is higher. Some students may not have experienced classes in all of the four named formats and so only put down the format they have the most. Other may have put down the format they are taught through most often.²⁸

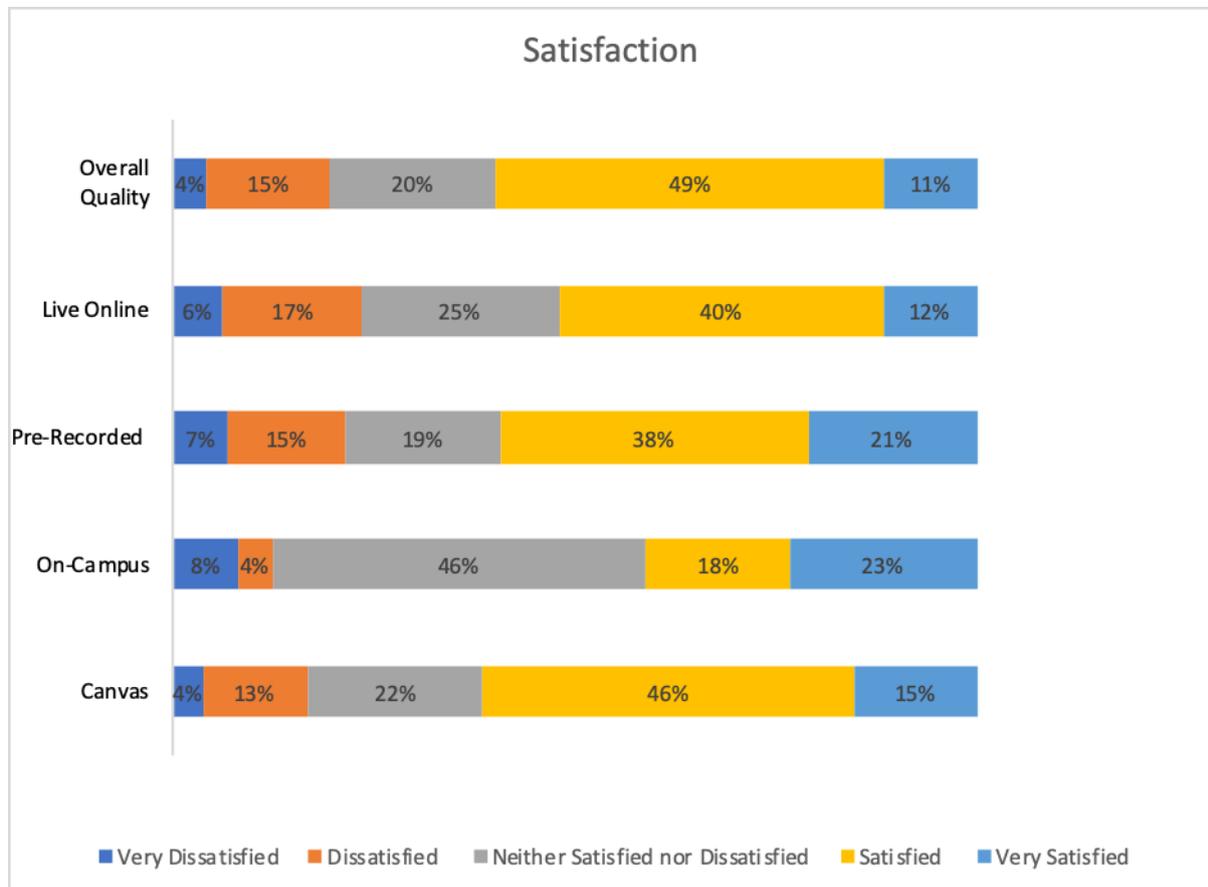


Figure 3 – Q1) Please rate how satisfied you are with the following.

The 5-part Likert satisfaction scale showed a majority towards ‘satisfied’ in all of the sections of Question 1, as seen in Figure 3, (bar the on-campus class question as stated in Item 3 of the Appendix.) However, the qualitative data brings doubt to a straightforward interpretation of this answer. One possibility is the Irish tendency of agreement²⁹, especially given that ‘satisfied’ is not a strong positive emotion³⁰. Perhaps a 7-part Likert scale would have accommodated for a greater understanding here.

The qualitative data was transferred to Microsoft Word documents. Initial analysis consisted of taking sample pages at set intervals and grouping the answers thematically. Secondary analysis used Voyant Tools³¹ to interrogate the qualitative data using computational text analysis.

²⁸ ITEM 3

²⁹ Hickey, R. (2015). The Pragmatics of Irish English and Irish. From: Amador Moreno, C., McCafferty, K., and Vaughan, E., (eds) *Pragmatic Markers in Irish English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 17-36.

³⁰ Merriam-Webster, “Satisfied” Available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/satisfied> [Accessed 26 Nov 2020]

³¹ Voyant Tools. Available at <https://voyant-tools.org> [Accessed 26 Nov 2020]

The qualitative answers gleaned from the open text boxes in the survey provide better guides as to what the students think regarding their experiences of online learning, with the most reiterated points being as follows;

What do you like most about live online classes?

Creates structure in the day	Students feel more pressure to attend live classes than pre-recorded ones. They use this to create a schedule in their day. Having a routine and a timetable is healthier and more productive, and makes the experience feel more like University pre-Covid.
Interactive/Social element	Students like being able to put a face onto their lecturer and develop a relationship with them. They also appreciated getting to know who was in their class, in whatever capacity that is possible.
Can ask questions & get immediate replies	Students value being able to get fast replies to questions they may have. They like the live classes for this purpose. Many mentioned the chat function as being useful for this also.

Table 1 – Key findings from Q4) What do you like most/least about live online classes?

What do you like least about live online classes?

Disorganisation & No Shows	With the timetable no longer always being as fixed as it would have been pre-Covid, there is a degree of confusion and disorganisation as to when live classes are being held. Some lecturers are deciding to hold live classes at different times during the week, or to hold them at the last half-hour of the hour slot, etc. This constant changing is causing students to feel anxious about not knowing when the classes are on. Lack of thorough organisation means that old calendar invites etc. are still open, leading to no shows. Notifications coming from various sources (Canvas, email, social media), means students don't know where to go to look for priority updates.
When they take too long	Some students felt that, without the pressures of having to walk to another class, lecturers were taking full advantage of the hour slot, and lecturing for 60 minutes without breaks. This was linked in with the students finding it difficult to stay concentrated.
Hard to concentrate (especially at home)	Students mentioned how their home environment was not conducive to effective studying. There is a need for neutral study spaces, such as the classroom used to afford, to allow students to study without their personal spaces infringing on them.
Tech & Internet issues	Tech issues on the side of the lecturer and/or students causes delays and breaks in the class. This includes Wi-Fi dropping, Teams crashing, unmuted mics etc. A combination of all of these leads to frustration and disengagement.

Table 2 – Key findings from Q4) What do you like most/least about live online classes?

What do you like most about pre-recorded classes?

Can pause, rewind, slow down/speed up	Students value being able to watch lectures at their own pace. They like the ability to rewind and pause classes while they take notes. They also mentioned liking that they can now take 'proper' notes. After being questioned on this, academic reps said that they can organise their notes, make them easier to learn and they can also make sure they have all the information in their notes.
Ability to re-watch lectures	This was particularly in the context of assignment and exam season. Students said they will like being able to watch/ listen to the lectures as a light form of revision.

Captions	The use of captions was incredibly valued by Disability Support Students in particular, as well as students for whom English is not their first language. Many visual learners also praised this as a positive advancement.
Work at my own time.	Students like being able to keep up with personal or work commitments more easily than in a non-online year. Not having to miss out on classes and being able to schedule them into their lives made University more accessible for these students.
Panopto	Students praised Panopto as their favourite medium for pre-recorded classes. This might be because it is the format that the majority have experience with, as per Q3 above, however students also highlighted captions, being able to skip forward to a particular section, and the accessibility of the technology as benefits.

Table 3 – Key findings from Q5) What do you like most/least about pre-recorded classes?

What do you like least about pre-recorded classes?

Can't ask questions	Students don't like how it can take quite some time to get responses to questions from pre-recorded classes. Whether they email their lecturer or message them on Canvas, their note taking, and subsequent learning, can be delayed until they get a response.
Too much content + Take too long = Overwhelm	The combination of the lecturers delivering too much content and the classes taking too long has led to overwhelm in a concerningly large number of students. Examples cited includes lecturers uploading 2.5 hours of video content for a one-hour timeslot. When these videos are watched at a pace which allows for aforementioned 'proper' notes to be taken, this timeframe increases significantly. Students are feeling like they are drowning in content.
No schedule	Students are being presented with reams of videos and documents to go through, with little to no guidance of what is to be covered when. Disorganisation on Canvas leads to increased time figuring out what to look at in which order and adds to the overall confusion. Anxiety increases when there is a lack of consistency in where files are stored.
Bad tech quality	Examples included bad audio quality and not being able to read the notes from the slides, problems which are related to lack of tech knowledge on the part of the lecturer, and lack of adequate devices on the part of the University &/ state. This leads to disengagement and frustration from students.
Long videos/Just notes	Long videos lead to disengagement, particularly when they take extra-long if rewinding, pausing etc. Where just notes are provided, students felt that they were teaching themselves, and lost motivation.

Table 4 – Key findings from Q5) What do you like most/least about pre-recorded classes?

Limitations

The survey overall had two main limitations. The first being that there was no breakdown of respondents by College. This question was left out because of the similarity of issues raised across the different College's class rep workshops and also to further shorten the survey. However, many members of staff were interested to know if the data in the survey was representative of the students in their discipline specifically, which this survey could not define.

The second limitation, following on from the first, was that because the survey asked for no identifying information the data cannot be divided into Undergraduate, Postgraduate, International, Mature, Access and Disability Support, students. However, in balance, the completely anonymous nature of the survey may have encouraged some students to respond more honestly to the qualitative questions.

I am also of the opinion that – sometimes - an over-emphasis on data only being relevant to one group can slow University-wide developments, which is particularly pertinent to this study, given the response rate and the basics and time sensitivity of the issues being discussed (that is, teaching and learning).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Once these results were analysed, I got advice from the Digital Education Advisory Group, in particular Mr Tom O'Mara, Head of Digital Education, to inform the recommendations below.

Based on the findings from the survey, the following questions were raised, to be considered by all teaching staff in particular.

With regards to content delivery;

How does the planned timetable reflect delivery?

Is the blend of live and non-live delivery adequate to achieve module objectives?

Would students benefit from more live interaction (esp. first/final years)?

With regards to assessment;

Has the form of assessment been decided (e.g. essay, MCQ on Canvas...)?

Do the students know what this format is?

Do the students have a way to practice the format?

I knew that, for beneficial change to happen, these results and recommendations needed to be seen by as many staff in UCC as possible. Therefore, I presented them in PowerPoint form³² at various committees in UCC and got positive feedback from those present.

Phase 3, Validation

Some key findings from the survey were shared on the Students' Union Instagram story³³ with the following aims;

- To gauge an understanding as to the collegiate alliances of respondents, addressing the first limitation of the survey,
- To further engage students, and,
- To see if the interpretation I had gotten from the survey results was reflected in the population in this phase.

³² ITEM 4

³³ ITEM 5

Method

The population consists of the 12.3k followers on the SU Instagram account. It is worth noting that not all of these followers can be certified as current students of UCC.

A question box asking “which College are you in” was on the top half of each screen, with buttons for each of the four colleges. This was repeated across all five of the story posts.

Five pieces of information from the survey findings in Phase Two were chosen for each post, as follows;

- Q1) 51% had less than 6 live hours online a week.
- Q2) The majority (77%) said lecturers used Panopto for pre-recorded lectures.
- Q3) People sometimes found live classes awkward.
- Q4) People liked pre-recorded lectures because they can take proper notes.
- Q5) Students are feeling overwhelmed with content.

These points were chosen either because they were the most striking findings (Q1, Q2, Q5)) or because I wanted to confirm my interpretation of the qualitative data (Q3), Q4)). The question ‘Is this true for you?’ was asked, with a button for ‘Yes’ and ‘No’. Respondents could also directly reply to the story with an open ended answer if they wished to elaborate further, or also could click out of the story without answering at any stage.

The stories were posted on Monday 2nd November and were live for 24 hours. An example of the interface can be seen in Figure 4.

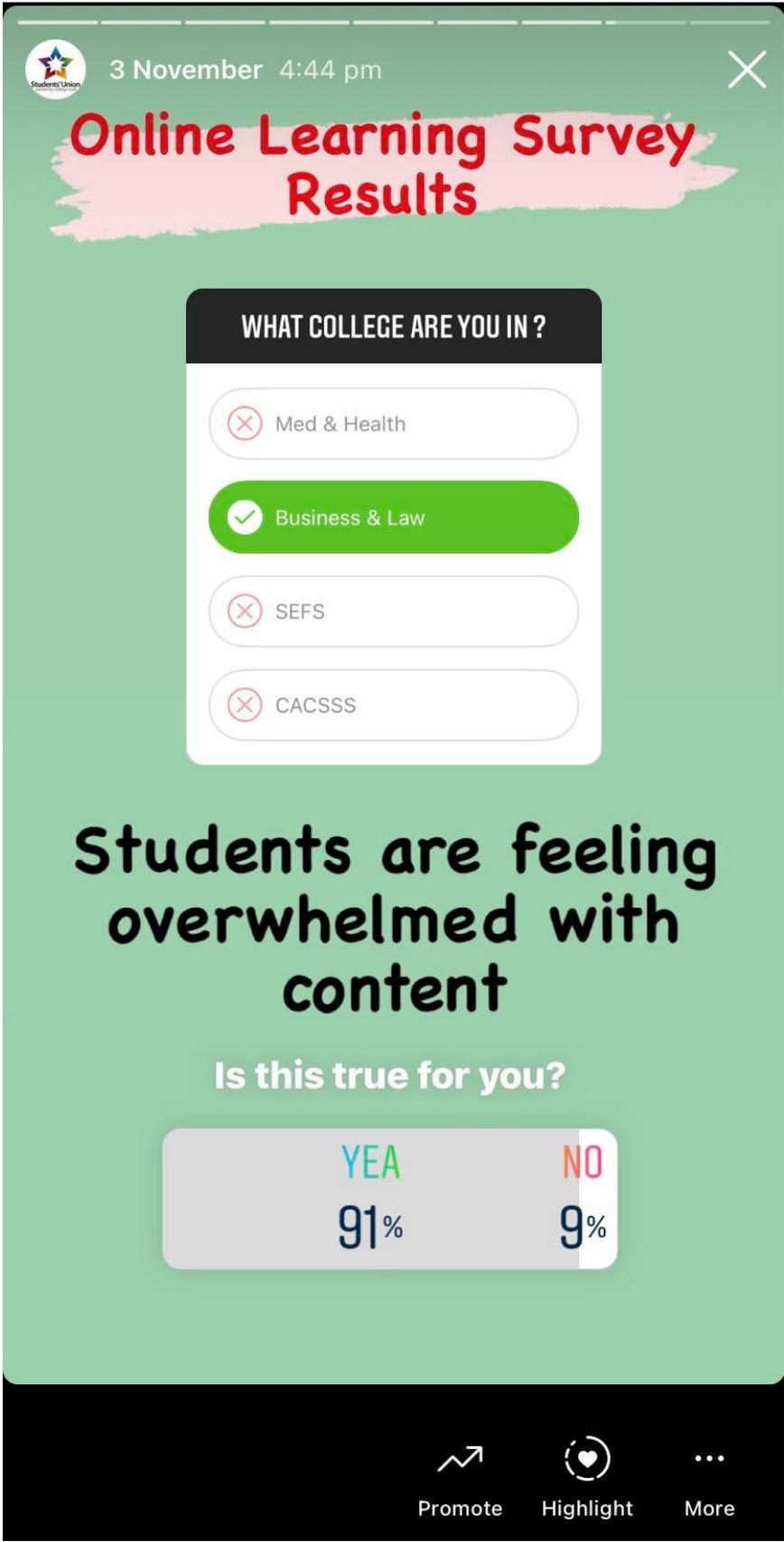


Table 4 – Example of Instagram Story as in Phase 3.

Results

Question	1	2	3	4	5		1	2	3	4	5		Average
Impressions	10748	10488	8455	7399	6922								8802
Yes	1366	1773	1794	2029	2292	Yes	59%	78%	75%	84%	91%		
No	936	487	589	392	216	No	41%	22%	25%	16%	9%		
Total	2302	2260	2383	2421	2508							Total	2374.8
M&H	425	346	327	289	300	M&H	17%	18%	17%	16%	17%		21%
B&L	705	581	612	627	622	B&L	28%	30%	33%	35%	35%		40%
SEFS	637	504	483	445	448	SEFS	26%	26%	26%	25%	25%		32%
CACSSS	722	498	452	413	413	CACSSS	29%	26%	24%	23%	23%		31%
Total	2489	1929	1874	1774	1783							Total	1969.8

Table 3 – Summary of data from the five Instagram stories based on the survey results. | 487 = 487 respondents

- There was an average of 8802 impressions across the five Instagram stories
- There was an average of 1970 responses to the College question
- There was an average of 2375 responses to the Yes/No questions.

The high response rate indicated high levels of student engagement and a commitment to feedback. They have a clear understanding of what works to enable them to succeed and what does not.

There was a marked drop in responses to the College question from the first story. Taking the totals of the Yes/No question into account also, I am placing slightly more weight into the first answers for the College question.

The responses to the College question show us that the topics raised in the five stories are applicable across all the four colleges. It is likely that differences occur within Colleges, at the programme or even module level. This is why it is important for every member of staff to understand, consider and apply the recommendations as relating to their own students, given these results show that the survey findings are an accurate representation of the UCC student population.

Of note, there was a 91% ‘Yes’ response to Q5), indicating that overwhelm is an extremely common feeling among the 2509 students who replied, and therefore experienced among the student body at large.

Conclusions and Actions

These findings were added to the presentation³⁴ from Phase Two which was presented at the Governing Body of UCC, a University-wide Town Hall, the Head of Schools and Departments Forum, the Quality Enhancement Committee, and at a College of Business and Law Couch Talk. This presentation was shared among the class representatives and encouraged to be used by them to support any points they needed to make when in discussions with lecturers. This was to further ensure as many lecturing staff as possible saw the results of the study.

After consultation with Tom O’Mara and Clíodhna O’Callaghan from UCC’s Centre of Digital Education, it was decided to summarise the key findings into a one page document. Supports will be associated with some of the issues so staff can learn how to improve their online teaching delivery. A segment of the Office of the Vice President for Teaching and

³⁴ ITEM 6

Learning's weekly newsletter email will be allocated to 'Students Say' and will include quotes and results from the study. The Centre for Digital Education Teach Digi's session for Semester Two will be thematically aligned to the key findings in the survey.

Discussion

This study had the overall goal of gathering student feedback on their experiences of online learning a third of the way through Semester One of the 2020/21 academic year. Many of the findings here reflect results from research conducted across the globe, both about online content delivery generally, and as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, this report is unique in that many of the students here would have already experienced online learning in Semester Two of the 2019/20 academic year, either in UCC or in another school or institution and were expecting a certain degree of online learning this academic year. To the best of my knowledge, no study has been published with comparable data to date.

Flexibility:

Many students held very balanced views of their experiences of online learning, expressing both what they liked most and least, as prompted in the qualitative questions. One of the main themes that emerged was that of flexibility and choice. Students appreciated being able to tailor their learning to the rhythm of their own life, allowing them to accommodate caring, employment or other personal responsibilities. George Veletsianos, Professor in the School of Education and Technology at Royal Roads University and Canada Research Chair in Innovative Learning and Technology “has long advocated for the kind of increased flexibility and compassion” that occurred in higher education institutes during the first lockdown.³⁵

Challenges of study space & personal responsibilities:

However, the students also highlighted the difficulties they faced with having to learn and study in their home space, often in their rented bedrooms. Aside from having to supply their own hardware and internet, students also highlighted how difficult it was for them to concentrate and study effectively. The UK Engagement Study 2020, conducted by Advance HE had almost 14,000 responses from students around the UK. It found that during the lockdown in spring 2020, “the proportion of students spending time caring for others grew from 27 per cent to 45 per cent.”³⁶ This is reflected in the range of student experience in this analysis.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks noted how “home was the place where I was forced to conform to someone else’s image of who and what I should be”, whereas school allowed her to “reinvent” herself.³⁷ Many students no longer have the luxury of leaving their personal duties at the door when they enter the neutral space of the classroom. Their lives are intertwined into their learning like never before and this study indicates how students are finding it challenging to live up to their previous standard of performance. “This has highlighted the need to move beyond thinking of learners in the context of a situated learning environment (e.g. within the academic institution) to consider where learners are (temporally and geographically) and what else is going on in their lives such as work, family and commuting (e.g. Thomas & Jones, 2017).”³⁸

³⁵ Kong, S. (2020) Learning to learn from a distance. *Maclean's*. 2020;133(6): 69-71

³⁶ McKie, A., Locked-down students had less time in class but felt more engaged, *Times Higher Education*, 12 Nov 2020, Available at <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/locked-down-students-had-less-time-class-felt-more-engaged> [Accessed 27 Nov 2020]

³⁷ hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress : education as the practice of freedom*. New York : Routledge

³⁸ O'Regan, M. (2020) Learning at a Distance but not a Distance Learner: Meeting the Needs of a Diverse Body of Students Post COVID-19. *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Volume 12, Number 2*

Communication & Engagement:

Another key finding from the study above was the lack of interaction between students and their peers, and students and their lecturers. The 2% of respondents to Study 2 who had zero live classes a week were not given a scheduled opportunity to interact with their lecturer in conversation. Across the qualitative data, students were consistent in their desire for contact with their lecturer in order to ask questions. Along with the flexibility that asynchronous delivery allows, there is a definite need for synchronous interaction between students and teaching staff. The National Forum for the Enhancement for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education had similar findings in their 2020 INDEx survey, stating that, “students requested more interactivity in teaching, in both lectures and online”³⁹

Relationships, ‘Belonging’ & Loneliness:

In 2019, Harrison found that “The building of relationships and rapport in videos was ...deemed to be particularly important to distance courses”⁴⁰. Linked to increased student performance is that sense of belonging and mattering and “how students do much better when they have developed a sense that they belong and they matter ... in their places of learning (see Allen, Kern, Vella-Brodrick, Hattie, & Waters, 2018; Flett, 2018a; Kivlighan et al., 2018).”⁴¹ In brief, “connection to others is key when it comes to online learning (see Seiver & Troja, 2014).”⁴² This need for continual interaction with lecturers is highlighted across the board in studies of online learning (e.g. Seiver & Troja (2014)⁴³, Kong (2020)⁴⁴, O’Regan (2020)⁴⁵ & el Mansour & Mupinga (2007)⁴⁶).

The need for contact only increased as we entered into Ireland’s second nation-wide lockdown. Isolation has become prevalent across all age groups and has had an impact on students’ experiences of online learning as well. Loneliness has been recorded as accompanying a plethora of negative emotions⁴⁷, all of which stemming from lack of social engagement and all feeding into the feeling of overwhelm.

Overwhelm:

By far, overwhelm is the dominant theme of the study. 91% of 2503 respondents from Phase 3 stated that they were overwhelmed with the amount of content, a stark figure. A 2016 study into the impact of design on learner’s preference for online education platforms stated that, “in the absence of face-to-face communication, it is easy for students to become confused or lost in complex course structures, making interaction with the content more difficult. Course

³⁹ National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2020) "Irish National Digital Experience (INDEx) Survey: Summary of Main Report," in *teachingandlearning.ie*. Available at <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/irish-national-digital-experience-index-survey-summary-of-main-report/>. [Accessed 27 Nov 2020]

⁴⁰ Harrison, T. (2019) How distance education students perceive the impact of teaching videos on their learning, *Open Learning, The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning Vol35, Issue 3* 260-276

⁴¹ Besser, A., Flett, G.L., & Zeigler-Hill, V. (2020)

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Seiver, J.G., & Troja, A (2014).

⁴⁴ Kong, S. (2020) Learning to learn from a distance. *Maclean’s. 2020;133(6)*: 69-71

⁴⁵ O’Regan, M. (2020)

⁴⁶ el Mansour, B., & Mupinga, D., M., (2007) Students’ positive and negative experiences in hybrid and online classes. *College Student Journal 41*, 242-248.

⁴⁷ Cacioppo, J., & Patrick, W. (2008). *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company,

designers should keep this in mind and strive for both simplicity and redundancy in their system representations.”⁴⁸

Consistency:

Consistency and strict organisation of the content across the Virtual Learning Environment, and a dedication to structure will all contribute to easing overwhelm and creating a more productive and positive learning experience.⁴⁹ It is clear that students feel their learning experience could be improved through “universal, effective and consistent use of the VLE”.⁵⁰

Everyone is learning in 2020:

Never before have the lines between student and teacher been blurred so much. Everyone has become a learner in 2020. The first lockdown showed us how to be resilient in the face of the unprecedented. I believe the second has taught us how to adapt⁵¹ in consideration of wide and diverse perspectives. In the setting of higher education, it is important that we learn from the pandemic, from our experiences, and from each other. “The importance of continual engagement with learning arises because of the necessity for adaptability and responsiveness at both individual and national levels, and the need to provide citizens with the capacity to embrace and navigate change. Higher education needs to be externally responsive to wider social, economic, environmental and civic challenges, in addition to being internally responsive to the needs of students and researchers.”⁵²

Jonathan Neves, head of business intelligence and surveys at Advance HE, said ...“This year has illustrated just how important it is to be in close contact with the student voice, and to do so efficiently and effectively in these particularly busy and challenging times.”⁵³ This study aimed to establish how students experience online learning. The enthusiasm and willingness to provide this feedback is indicative of how eager the students are to belong to the University, to participate, and at the end of the day, to learn. The responsibility to listen to these eager voices now falls onto those who can make positive differences in the University community.

“What can we do now in order to be able to do tomorrow what we are unable to do today?”
– Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope; Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed.*⁵⁴

“You can ask questions and listen to other people’s questions and learn from them...”
- UCC student⁵⁵

⁴⁸ al-Samarraie, H., Selim, H., Teo, T., & Zaqout, F. (2016): Isolation and distinctiveness in the design of e-learning systems influence user preferences. *Interactive Learning Environments Vol 25 Issue 4* 452-466

⁴⁹ As above

⁵⁰ National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2020) "Irish National Digital Experience (INDEX) Survey: Summary of Main Report," in *teachingandlearning.ie*. Available at <https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/publication/irish-national-digital-experience-index-survey-summary-of-main-report/>. [Accessed 27 Nov 2020]

⁵¹ Using the definition of adaptability and resilience as, “adaptability is different from resilience because adaptability is about coping and thriving in new circumstances rather than having the ability to bounce back from setbacks.” In Besser, A., Flett, G.L., & Zeigler-Hill, V. (2020)

⁵² Department of Education and Skills (2019). National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 Available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/072a65-national-strategy-for-higher-education-to-2030/> [Accessed 27 Nov 2020]

⁵³ McKie, A. (2020)

⁵⁴ Freire, P., & Freire, A. M. A. (1994). *Pedagogy of hope: Reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.

⁵⁵ ITEM 7

Recommendations

In order to gauge the extent to which UCC students' experiences of online learning is reflected nationally, feedback should be sought from students in the various other higher education institutes in Ireland. These reports can then be compared to get a nationwide picture of student feedback. The wider aim is to promote students' voices as critical to any discussion about the future of higher education, particularly digital education, and to inform higher education institutes, government and stakeholders generally about the diverse student experience.

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el Mansour, B., & Mupinga, D., M., (2007) Students' positive and negative experiences in hybrid and online classes. *College Student Journal* 41, 242-248.

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Appendix

ITEM 1 Nineteen-question draft survey

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdzbstsLKg-fFvBfvM_2MOpvnSfAMVMoO-gZ1-TSnUz7qDLQ/viewform

ITEM 2 Nine question survey sent to students

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSemGXf35IT-kYVMZVH834F90RU7im8HhuYPV3KyX2x-q9SZuw/viewform>

ITEM 3 Survey Analysis

<https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:25a8232c-e91e-4155-840a-6e539839defd>

ITEM 4 Presentation Version 1

<https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:80df1bae-04ad-414a-bec5-deb73eabccf6>

ITEM 5 Phase 3 Results

<https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:e0eb8342-fa1c-4639-8c22-a2ddd8fa7cd>

ITEM 6 Presentation Version 2

<https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:c832a4e4-bf97-4179-a4a3-a01899a053e3>

ITEM 7 Qualitative Data of Live Classes

<https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:44a13c73-d910-41fc-8ed7-68fb29e7e2ac>

ITEM 8 Qualitative Data of Recorded Classes

<https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:4f2a4908-31cf-4504-a909-3279f76d237a>

ITEM 9 University College Cork Student Headcount Statistics

<https://documentcloud.adobe.com/link/track?uri=urn:aaid:scds:US:42e24912-8f27-4e1b-9d17-3ea8638b9582>