



# EMPOWERING STUDENTS THROUGH ASSESSMENT: SNAPSHOT OF THE STUDENT VOICE

*This guide was developed by our [UCD Students as Partners in Teaching and Learning](#).*

## Introduction

This resource aims to present to those who teach (teaching staff i.e. lecturers, tutors, demonstrators) the benefits of, and provide examples for, inclusive assessment in higher education. Inclusive assessment has been described as the ‘design and use of fair and effective assessment methods and practices that enable all students to demonstrate to their full potential what they know, understand and can do’ (Hockings 2010, p. 34). Empowering students is one key element of an inclusive experience (See [UCD Teaching & Learning, 2024](#)). This resource discusses the importance of student empowerment in their learning, summarises some UCD students' views on this, and based on this, suggests how teaching staff can support empowerment through inclusive assessment.

## What is Empowerment and Why is it Important?

Empowerment within the higher education sector relates to enhancing a student’s experience by providing them with more power surrounding their learning. By slightly altering teaching methods to facilitate an empowering and inclusive assessment environment, students are more likely to be engaged with coursework; their learning and satisfaction can improve (Shukla & Arora, 2023); they can gain skills which will prepare them for the future; and they become more motivated in their overall education (TeachThough Staff, 2019).

In the academic literature on this topic, empowering students through ideas such as flexibility, choice, empathy, and understanding, students flourish in the academic environment, feeling more motivated and engaged (Shukla & Arora, 2023; Wanner et al., 2021). There is a general understanding that through active participation in their education, students are more likely to understand their own circumstances and change unequal power relations, overall improving their individual experience and situation (Bovill & Bulley, 2011). Empowerment can be implemented in a variety of ways. At the University of Northampton, a research project was implemented called Assess4success (Butcher et al., 2010). The aims of this project were to understand the levels of inclusivity embedded in the student’s education experience. Throughout the project, it was found that even with higher levels of inclusivity, some students were at a disadvantage due to the inflexibility of assessments and their overall learning structure (Butcher et al., 2010). In all areas of research, it was found that the implementation of flexibility, choice, empathy and understanding in students’ education was significant in both enhancing their learning capabilities and increasing their motivation and engagement with their course (Elkhoury, 2020).

Additionally, lecturers can benefit by teaching a module that students find motivating and inclusive providing a better teaching experience for the lecturers. Student-lecturer relationships can prosper due

to the increased respect students find for their lecturers when their views and needs are considered. These relationships provide a significantly more harmonious experience for both the lecturers and the students, overall facilitating a motivating, engaging and respectful learning/teaching environment.

## Student Experiences

This section outlines the experiences in a snapshot of conversations with three UCD students from a range of courses and incorporates the experience of the UCD T&L student partner in this conversation. Students were in age ranges from 20-24 years old (pseudonyms: 'Anne', 'John' and 'Claire') and had a variety of different experiences and views on empowerment. The three students were asked three different questions:

- What do you like about assessments in UCD?
- What do you dislike about assessments in UCD?
- How could you feel more empowered regarding assessments in UCD?

*All quotes are paraphrased and have been approved by each student.*

### WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT ASSESSMENTS IN UCD?

With this question, there were two main responses: a preference for assignments over essays and an ability for flexibility regarding their assessments. For Anne, exams were a cause for high levels of anxiety. Assignments allowed for more time, preparation, and understanding of the task, allowing the student to feel more at ease and have a stronger sense of enjoyment when completing the task. Following the COVID years, this is definitely an area that requires more thought. Many students who are currently in college have seen their education affected by COVID. Our students-as-partners shared their experience of this: *'Personally, I never sat my Leaving Certificate, and my first year of college was entirely online. My first exam wasn't until my third year, and by that point, it had been over seven years since I had sat a state examination. It was a real cause of anxiety and many other students have experienced the same challenges.'*

Another aspect enjoyed by students was the ability to have choice and variety within their assignments. John told us they *'love the option of essay and assignment topics. I enjoy being able to do assignments in areas of interest to me.'* Additionally, Claire, the third student, said:

*'I enjoy the variety and choice of assessments within the module. I enjoy having the option to do a podcast, an essay, or a video.'*

Choice is one of the key elements that empower students and allow students to feel in control of their learning (O'Neill, 2022). Choice allows a wide range of students to be included and catered for, allowing for a diversified teaching experience (Schwartz et al., 2017).

### WHAT DO YOU DISLIKE ABOUT ASSESSMENTS IN UCD?

Key elements occurring under this topic were lack of flexibility, insufficient support, and rigid deadlines. Anne described their experience with having autism and trying to complete exams within the deadline:

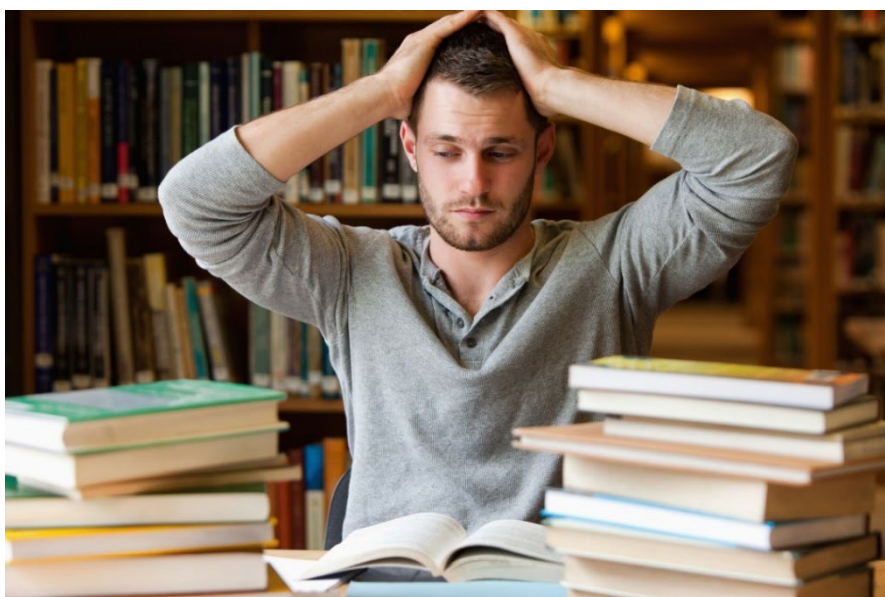
*'I struggle with lack of flexibility regarding equal access. I find the additional 15 minutes allocated to me in exams inadequate and I generally struggle with timings in exams.'*

Similarly, John finds many supports inadequate: *'There can be a lack of support when writing essays, especially in electives from different schools. It feels daunting if the first assignment is worth 50% and I have never done an assignment like this before.'*



Our students-as-partners also empathise with John's experience: *'As a philosophy student, I have had four years to learn how to write a philosophical essay. However, this year I took an English elective and had to learn efficiently how to differentiate a philosophical essay from an English essay – and even though this doesn't seem like a big task – they are completely different formats. Increased support for both exams and assignments seems necessary to empower students, in this case.'*

Claire's struggle was slightly different: *'I work 30 hrs a week to provide for myself and struggle to meet certain deadlines. I find it hard to attend every lecture because of work.'* Many students face difficulty in balancing work and college workload. For many students working is non-negotiable. In this instance, flexibility and understanding are crucial for allowing students to feel empowered.

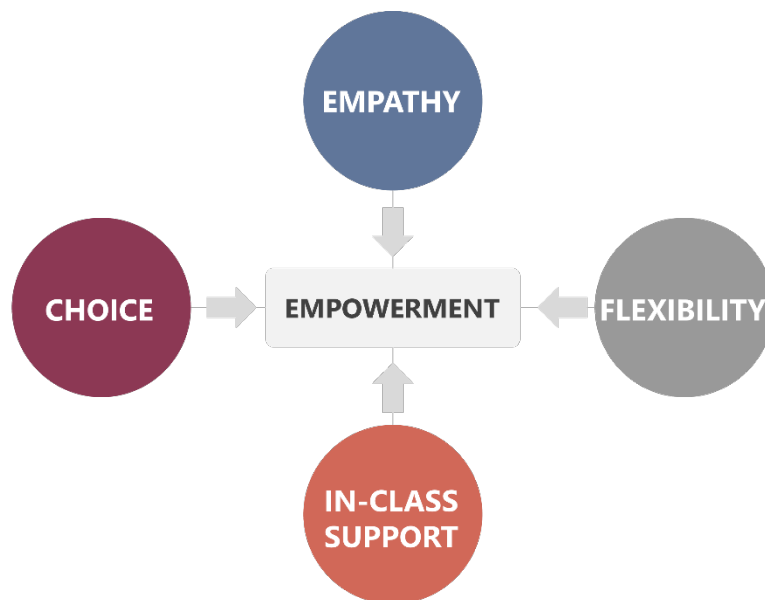


These snapshots of experiences from the UCD students start to highlight some of the aspects that are impacting their learning such as:

- the pressure to work while in UCD
- the lack of familiarity with assessment types in different disciplines beyond their own
- the time pressure in certain types of assessment, such as examinations
- the value students have on assessments that are engaging and motivating
- the need for support and having opportunities to catch up on their learning when they fall behind

## Key Messages: The Student Voice

Based on these conversations with the UCD students, and the learning experience of the UCD T&L Student Partner, the following are some key messages that these students feel would contribute to a more inclusive learning and assessment experience for them.



### IN-CLASS SUPPORTS

Creating a safe environment at the start of the semester is important for allowing students to feel empowered in their education. Learning students' names or engaging in those awkward icebreakers in the first class can greatly enhance the teaching and learning environment. This aids in supporting a harmonious learning environment where students feel comfortable addressing concerns and queries. Additionally, providing support throughout the semester will help empower students. This could include creating worksheets for students to allow more collaborative, engaging work or creating assessment workshops where students can go and receive help with their assessments. By facilitating these supports, students feel important and empowered to engage with their learning knowing they are guided throughout the process.

*'Creating a safe space where students can express their views freely'* can support a more empowering environment (Shukla & Arora, 2023, p.1327). In-class support is key to achieving this.

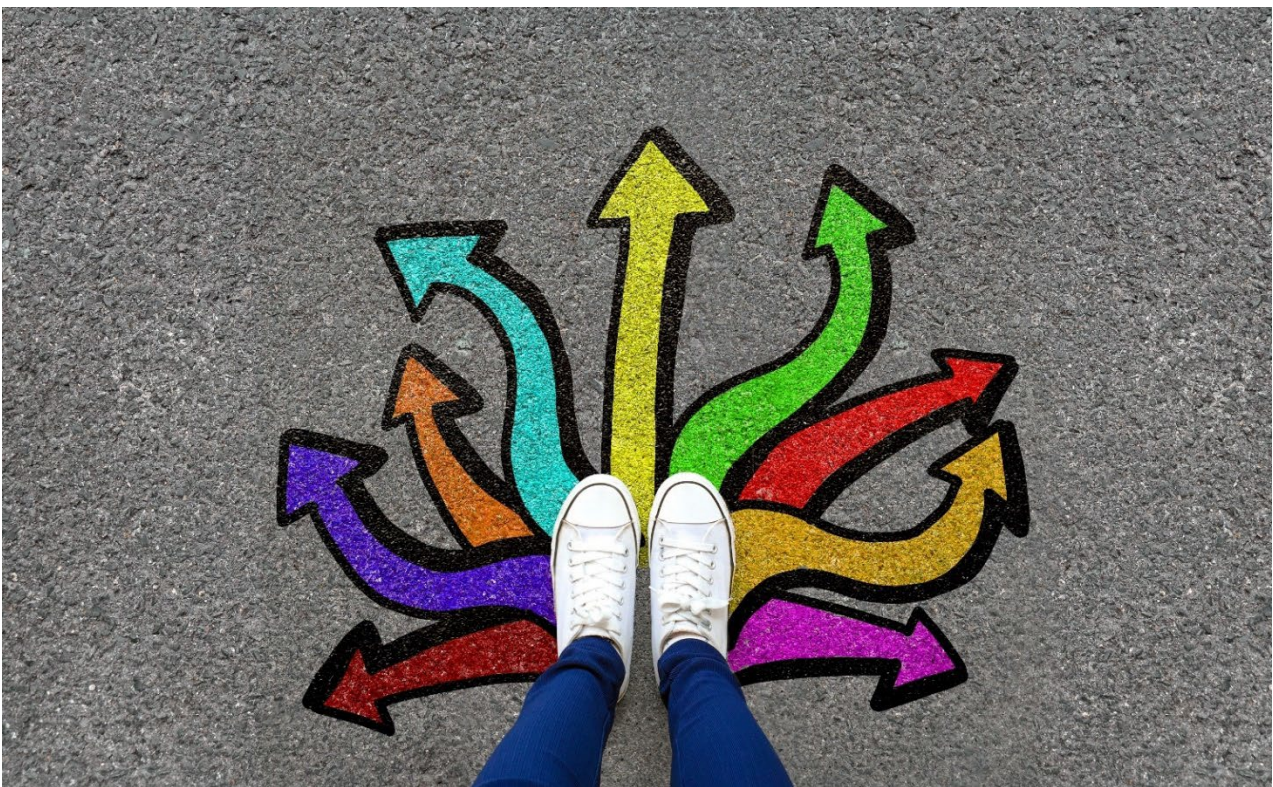
## CHOICE

Students feel empowered when they are engaged and enjoying the learning experience (STLHE, 2024). Providing choice, allows students to feel like an equal contributor to their education. Choice can be implemented in a variety of ways. Through assessments, students could choose to do a video essay instead of a written essay. Alternatively, students may feel encouraged by being allowed to choose their own essay questions from a list provided to them. Choice is instrumental in any capacity for allowing empowerment and should be considered in any teaching method.

UCD's new institutional approved categories of its [Key Assessment Types](#) (2024) now support the use of [Student Negotiated or Choice of Assessment](#) as one of the key assessment approaches.

## FLEXIBILITY

As shown through Claire's experiences, many students have other commitments outside of college. Flexibility can greatly empower students and allow them to be leaders in their learning. Regarding assessments, teaching staff could consider opportunities for flexibility such as allowing students to enhance grades through draft resubmissions, whereby if a student is disheartened by a grade, they can resubmit a new version to be marked in place of the original. This allows students who may be taking the module as an elective, where the assessment method is unfamiliar, to receive extra grace when writing - for example, a philosophical essay for a science student or a chemistry lab report for an English student. Providing examples of these assessment types for these first-time students can also help. This flexible approach is supported and elaborated on in international literature 'students valued the opportunity of making a choice about their assignments, in particular, choosing their own dates for submission and the weightings for their assignments' (Wanner et al., 2021, p.12).



Introducing asynchronous online learning may be another flexible approach which is equally empowering for students. Through this, students who struggle to attend every class can make an agreement with the lecturer ahead of time and be granted access to additional materials online. Further, an online discussion could take place which is asynchronous to the class materials, where students who are either struggling or unable to attend the lecture, can discuss the content with other students and feel in control of their learning. This online element means students with other commitments such as work or short-term/long-term disabilities still have the same opportunity and the same support as other students, allowing for an inclusive and empowering education experience.

## EMPATHY

Even with flexibility, choice, and in-class support, the best way to help empower students is through understanding and empathy. After building a harmonious classroom environment, students will feel more comfortable asking for advice and help. Whilst students understand that lecturers must be fair, providing some understanding as to why they need additional support is crucial. A student may be going through a hard time at home, struggling with an assignment, or are just simply overwhelmed. Each student has differentiating requirements and beginning to understand this can enhance the student's experience significantly.

In a national study of nearly 4000 Irish students, 'kindness and caring, and being supportive, are particularly prevalent characteristics among exceptional teachers'. This included 'being compassionate towards students, 'genuinely' caring about students, providing extra support especially when students need this, knowing students' names, responding to students and helping them to do better' (National Forum, 2019, p.5).

Empathy and understanding are the key starting points for supporting student empowerment (Shukla & Arora, 2023).

## Conclusion

Students need to feel empowered in their education to be motivated and engaged. (Shukla & Arora, 2023; STLHE, 2024) Through reading existing research and seeing how other higher education institutions have implemented empowerment, we can understand the desire to implement it in our own institutions. From student experiences, we can learn about which areas need to be improved and facilitate a better experience.

Finally, through some of the key messages provided here, we can conclude that whilst there are many tools to enhance empowerment, the most important step is understanding and empathy which provide a significant impact on a student's journey to empowerment.

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