**But why didn't they ask the students?**

**Understanding more fully what engages today's higher education students**

Submitted by Angela Short

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## Abstract

Despite an extensive body of research, the student engagement (SE) concept eludes an agreed definition, with the absence of the student voice in the literature contributing to the lack of conceptual clarity. No one understands SE better than students themselves, their expertise resting on them simply being students. Drawing on those often-excluded voices, this research analysed the open-ended comments in the national Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE), for each of the years 2013–2019. A critical realist mixed methods approach allowed multiple and dissonant voices to be heard, different levels of reality to be established and causality explained. Exploiting this rich secondary qualitative data addressed the notion of a reductive engagement with a singular voice, and facilitated the development of a *student-led* model of SE.

Systematic analysis of the comments unmuted diverse student voices capturing the how and why of SE in Irish higher education (HE) nationally, and the context specific policies and practices that help to explain the survey's quantitative indicators. For students in Irish HE, *how* we teach matters as much as *what* we teach, the process of SE taking precedence over the product or outcome-based emphasis inherent in engagement surveys. Students consider engagement to be a relational process that impacts on their emotional, cognitive and behavioural states and is best understood in the context of the teacher student relationship (TSR) in the classroom. Relational pedagogies facilitate student-faculty interaction inside and outside the classroom, providing the seedbed for the development of the TSR. Accessing support and resources online is essential for students, especially those for whom caring or work

responsibilities prevent regular campus attendance. However, students' capacity to interact either face to face or online depends on lecturer approaches and attitudes, which can support or limit student agency. This, despite the emphasis on *student* behaviours in the ISSE which, it is argued, places the responsibility for engagement largely on students themselves. Methodologically, Leximancer, a latent semantic analysis software, enabled a cost-effective, efficient and credible means of analysing these rich student comments. Correlating the results of the automated analysis with the researcher's qualitative interpretation confirmed and enhanced the credibility of the findings.

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# Chapter 1 – Perspectives on Student Engagement (SE)

## 1.1 Introducing SE

Providing students with a quality education has always been of central importance to university leaders but more recently attention has shifted from the student experience to SE. Engaging students conceives of students as active partners in the educational process and as responsible for their own learning and formation (Klemenčič 2015). As the concept of engagement continues to garner attention from researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, the importance of understanding person and context-related factors that impact on SE is increasingly recognised (Bae & Lai, 2020). SE has become the defining characteristic of quality teaching and learning in higher education (HE) (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). The literature confirms that engagement is positively related to learning outcomes (Kuh et al., 2000; Pascarella et al., 1996; Pike and Kuh 2005; Pike et al., 2010). In the spirit of reciprocity, students engage in activities that are linked to desired outcomes, and universities create the conditions that meet the needs of all students (Kuh, 2009). While students need to be committed to their studies, institutions must be committed to student success (Kahu, 2013) by learning to provide HE in ways likely to promote high-quality learning outcomes (Coates & McCormick, 2014).

That SE has become the *sine qua non* of HE is because, as a concept, it can comfortably serve the purposes of various stakeholders across learning and teaching, institutional management, and national policy contexts (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). However, it has taken on an even greater significance in light of policies aimed at widening participation among non-traditional groups, those cohorts who are consistently underrepresented in HE. Student engagement is the

means by which institutions and academics can cope with the demands of a massified system and a diversified student body when 'engagement' can no longer be taken for granted (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015, p.350). This transformation necessitates engaging with student perspectives to access more sophisticated understandings of how students learn (Darwin, 2020).

Viewed as a shared responsibility between the institution and the student, the engagement concept is a key prognosticator of success, retention, and perseverance in HE (Denovan et al., 2019). While definitions of the phenomenon vary in the research, most are premised on the belief that what students learn in college is linked to how they devote their time and energy to their studies (Kuh, 2003). It is commonly defined as the behavioural, cognitive and affective activities that students engage in (Fredricks et al., 2004), and has more recently focused on the psycho-social aspects of engagement (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Also, "an emerging body of evidence underscores the context-specific, social and idiosyncratic nature of SE in learning environments" (Bae & Lai, 2020, p.1129).

#### 1.1.1 The missing link – the student voice in SE

Despite the significant attention devoted to identifying the factors associated with SE, the underlying reasons for, and the notion of 'student engagement' itself, remain weakly theorised (Kahn, 2013, p.1005). The simple fact that the literature often fails to fully illuminate the concept and the various and diverse ways that SE is conceived and defined, only adds to the fuzziness of the concept (Vuori, 2014). The lack of clarity may be explained by the absence of student voices in the literature (Trowler, 2010). That the student voice is often excluded from dialogue on student engagement perhaps reflects the relative silence in the literature on the power relationship between students and teachers

in HE (Seale, 2009). Power operates in classrooms in ways that are both visible and invisible (Giroux, 1981) in who is allowed to speak and whose voice is listened to. Giving voice to the experiences of the least powerful, arguably the students, is more important than ever in the context of widening participation in HE (Hampton & Blythman, 2006 in Seale, 2009, p.997).

Krause notes that institutions grappling with accommodating the needs of greater numbers of students with diverse needs, are struggling to understand "a myriad of student behaviours and attitudes which are deemed essential to a high-quality undergraduate experience" (Krause, 2005, p.3). Acknowledging that there exists 'no one size fits all' approach to engagement, there is a call for a focused approach that aligns with institutional mission and an analysis of the campus environment through listening to diverse student voices (Baron & Corbin, 2012, p.768-769). Yet what is actually being summoned in the notion of student voice is often not clear (McLeod, 2011). She cautions that "voice is a resonant yet slippery term, sometimes used literally, sometimes metaphorically, sometimes with benign connotations, but at other times with subtle regulatory and oppressive ones" (McLeod, 2011, p.181). Understanding the individual experiences of our diverse student bodies, necessitates listening to the often-excluded student voice and in the spirit of democracy, including students *speaking back* in the dialogue about engagement (Shor, 1996). However, student surveys necessarily abstract the student voice, resulting in their experiences being spoken *about* and *for* by others rather than being directly listened to or heard, thereby homogenising the student voice, rendering it singular (Darwin, 2020, emphasis added).

This study addresses the lacuna in the literature that involves the perspectives of students about what engages them by the analysis of the

comments that students add in the ISSE. Giving due attention to the student comments addresses the lack of inclusion of authentic student voices in the scholarship on SE. These mini narratives, which I argue constitute the national student voice, provide authentic evidence of how students in Irish HE experience teaching and learning. Engaging with the comments and feedback of students also addresses the perception that HE can be selective in its hearing of voices, often focusing on those forms of voice that have an external currency (Canning as cited in Lygo-Baker et al., 2019, p.5).

## 1.2 Why SE matters

Reforms aimed at expanding access to HE continue to embrace most HE systems across the globe with the number of university level students doubling to 207 million between 2000 and 2014 (Edwards et al.,2018). The rapid rise in demand, and continuing disparity in access, challenge governments who fund HE to meet the increasing costs. This increased demand for places in third level institutions in many regions of the world, including Ireland, has turned policymakers and HE leaders' attention to questions of efficiency, effectiveness, and equity of HE provision (Orr & Mishra, p.467 in Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). Unsurprisingly, this has led to a laser focus on value for money in terms of the overall impact of HE and, in particular, the question of impact on whom. Such calls for accountability are prompted in part by questions concerning whether colleges and universities use their resources effectively to promote student learning (Pike et al., 2011).

The 'Bologna Process' is aimed at harmonising various systems of European HE with the objective of creating a 'European Area of Higher Education' to promote the European system of HE on a worldwide scale and increase its

international competitiveness. One social dimension of the Bologna Process is a reform policy based on a participative equity outcome which aims to ensure that "the student body entering, participating in and completing HE at all levels [reflects] the diversity of (…) populations" (Orr & Mishra, p.467 in Ashwin & McVitty, 2015). Thus, educational success should be detached from a person's origins. HE policies across the globe are framed by similar social justice goals of greater numbers of citizens completing post-secondary education with advanced competence (Lawson & Lawson, 2013), but social justice educators throughout the western world are struggling to create more equitable educational outcomes (McMahon et al., 2012). Realising this laudable objective requires higher educational institutions to more fully understand the engagement experiences of all students, and, in doing so, enable the adjustment of policies and practices to meet those experiences (Krause, 2005). Recognising that SE occurs at the intersection of the institution and the student, is valuable as it shines a light on those processes and factors that influence student success (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

### 1.2.1 Engagement is not new

Engaging students has always been an issue in HE (Yorke, 2014) but widening participation polices have resulted in a massified sector where engaging students has become problematic (Kahn, 2013). Institutions struggle to understand and meet the needs of their traditional, and more specifically, their non-traditional students; these include mature students, economically disadvantaged students, ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities or caring responsibilities. While engagement is confirmed as an issue of concern across HE internationally (Trowler, 2010; Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2012; Zepke, 2015;

Kahu, 2013), what exactly it means for students to be engaged is a question that remains largely unanswered. The glaring absence of a precise meaning for SE renders it a vague and unclear concept, and this presents difficulties for effective scientific research and the attainment of rigorous knowledge in respect of it (Blumer 1940, p.707 in Balwant, 2017). That said, there is agreement that SE is the primary mechanism triggering the motivation to learn (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). This premise is supported by decades of research on undergraduate education asserting that the more actively engaged students are with their programmes of study, with faculty, staff, and other students, the more likely they are to persist in their studies and achieve their academic goals (McClenney, Mart & Adkins, 2006). That it is students' interaction with the learning environment that is key is also undisputed (Bryson & Hand, 2007), but institutions need to understand the contextual factors and conditions that encourage students to engage in activities that are linked to academic success (Kuh, 2003; 2009). Thus, engagement represents a synthesis of student purposeful actions and students' social and academic integration into university (Tinto, 1993), hence it is imperative that colleges have the means to measure how students are engaging.

### 1.3 Surveys to measure SE

As university leaders strive to access more and better intelligence on students (Klemenčič & Brennan 2013; Klemenčič & Chirikov, 2015), surveys are increasingly being used to gather data to inform institutional research and decision making. Among the mostly widely used information is student course evaluations, student approaches to learning and studying, student experience (satisfaction) and SE surveys. SE surveys, unlike satisfaction surveys, measure how often students engage in activities that have been linked to academic

success and the extent to which the institution supports these efforts (Kuh, 2009). The engagement construct, based on the work of several educationists and educational psychologists, including that of Chickering and Gamson (1987), focuses on good practices in undergraduate education. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) project, which revolves around a survey of college students (Kuh, 2001) has arguably been the most potent influence in establishing the link between what the student does while in college and the likelihood of attaining their academic goals (Yorke, 2014). The survey, developed in the US, assesses the extent to which college students are participating in educational practices that are strongly associated with high levels of learning and personal development. The success of the NSSE has since spawned several versions, outside of the US and Canada, that have been adapted or adjusted to suit different national contexts.

The Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) introduced in 2013, although now renamed as StudentSurvey.ie but for consistency is referred to as the ISSE throughout this study, is based on the Australian version (AUSSE) of the NSSE. The ISSE was introduced following the publication of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 report (Hunt, 2011). Emphasising the importance of including student voices in decisions around the quality of Irish HE, the strategy recommended that:

- A national student survey system should be put in place and the results published; and
- Every HE institution should put in place a comprehensive anonymous student feedback system, coupled with structures to ensure that action is taken promptly in response to student concerns (Hunt, 2011, p.17).

Responding to this recommendation, in 2013 the Irish Government funded the ISSE project to oversee the administration of a national survey of all publicly funded institutions of HE. The purpose of this annual mandatory survey is to provide benefits to each participating institution and its students by helping to improve feedback and the taking of appropriate action. Specifically, the survey enables documenting the experiences of the student population, allowing for year-on-year comparisons of key performance indicators. Crucially, the survey aims to provide insight into student opinion on important issues of HE policy and practice, to foster an ethos of students as partners, and to place the student at the heart of the quality agenda (Student Survey.ie National Report 2018, p.6). In this way, ISSE's purpose shares what Seale (2009) identifies as the two most commonly cited purposes of student voice projects in HE, quality enhancement and assurance.

### 1.3.1 Publishing what matters about SE nationally

Putting the ISSE in place fulfils the first recommendation from the strategy (Hunt, 2011), but now attention has turned to the second recommendation, that effective structures be put in place that support the actions needed to respond to student concerns. As the only national feedback instrument open to students in Irish HE, engagement with ISSE has been enthusiastic and sustained, evidenced in annual participation by all publicly funded HE institutions, and an increasing number of private funded institutions, in the first seven years since its inception in 2013. However, attention now turns to if and how institutions are responding to student concerns and, given the emphasis in Hunt (2011) on canvassing student feedback, I was surprised to learn that the two open-ended questions in the survey that allow students to freely voice their concerns are excluded from the

national analysis and the published report. These responses, often relegated to the periphery, their status mostly of secondary interest (Darwin, 2020), are the authentic student voice in the ISSE, as they allow students to raise issues that most impact on their engagement. The fixed response questions on the other hand are merely based on what others, albeit informed by the literature, consider to be important for SE.

This perhaps reflects how student perspectives are often confined to descriptive analysis of localised activities, their role in shaping higher education pedagogies still relatively underdeveloped (Darwin, 2020).

### 1.3.2 Measuring what counts

The old adage of what can be counted gets measured and what actually counts is often neglected, can be applied to the policy around the analysis of the open-ended questions in ISSE. Only the quantitative questions (65 out of 67) in the survey are subject to national analysis and included in the report and not the responses to the two open-ended questions in the survey. These open-ended questions ask students to report the ‘best’ aspects of how their institutions engage them and to identify what ‘could improve’ about how their institutions engage them. The argument for this differential treatment of the qualitative responses is that they are most likely context specific and so are of most relevance to the local institution. However, students largely raise their concerns through these open-ended responses, which are only dealt with purely at institution level. This is despite the fact that student concerns may suggest systemic issues which need to be addressed more widely. If the issues raised by students are being replicated across Irish HE, then this may demand action at a national policy level rather than the present practice of local remedial action. The challenge of analysing

thousands of open-ended comments perhaps contributes to their differential treatment, but this study's methodology can be adopted by institutions locally and ISSE nationally to make the task of analysing student comments accessible and amenable. In this way my research addresses the gap in our *national* intelligence about those aspects of SE that are of most concern regardless of institutional type or context. These concerns are discussed in the conclusions to this study and recommendations are made for how they might be addressed.

### 1.3.3 Understanding SE using surveys

Across HE globally, feedback questionnaires are one of the most commonly used mechanisms for gauging SE (Van der Velden et al., 2013) due to their capacity to canvas large numbers of student opinions about their academic experience. Yet, the evidence reveals that students are often unaware of the purpose of the survey (Brown, 2012) and are rarely provided with feedback about its results (Freeman et al., 2013). Anecdotal feedback from my own students confirms this. Similarly, my own experience as a lecturer in an Irish HE institution, teaches me that, in common with students, there is a lack of awareness amongst academic staff of the purposes and outcomes of the ISSE. While a number of factors can account for this, as discussed later in this thesis, engagement surveys take on a new significance when viewed as student evaluations of teaching (SETs) (Cheng & Marsh, 2010). Thiel (2019) opines that the UK National Student Survey (NSS) can be understood as a British attempt to introduce SETs but, significantly, he equates its purpose and use to the Australian Course Evaluation Questionnaire (CEQ) and the US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The ISSE as the local version of NSSE is therefore, by extension, included in Thiels's assessment of an engagement survey that

functions as a SET. The ISSE Project Steering Committee would disagree and were keen to point out, when the survey was piloted in 2013, that unlike the NSS, the survey was not a satisfaction survey. However, while the ISSE and by extension the NSSE, might not be classified as SETs, engagement surveys are viewed as proxies for institutional quality. Kuh is clear in this regard emphasising in his discussions on the purposes of the NSSE that "it is also intended to foster a particular way of thinking and talking about collegiate quality" (Kuh, 2001, p.12).

That engagement surveys can be considered a proxy for institutional quality is an argument that arises in the literature and can be linked to the absence of agreement on the meaning of SE. "The vagueness around student engagement means that it is currently used to refer to student engagement in learning activities, in the development of curricula, in quality assurance processes, and in institutional governance" (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015, p.343).

### 1.4 Look at who is not talking – student-faculty interaction and engagement

As a teacher and a researcher, I have long been interested in understanding how best to engage students. As I perused the ISSE results, I was taken aback by the low levels of student faculty interaction (SFI) reported by students and considered how this might impact on SE. A SFI indicator is calculated based on four questions in the survey that ask students how often students interacted with academic staff on a number of topics or activities. Students report how often they have discussed course topics, ideas or concepts, their individual performance and their career plans. They also indicate if, or how often, that have worked with academic staff on activities other than coursework. The results are disappointing – since the launch of the survey, across the years

(2013–2019), on average, 53% of all students report never having discussed career plans with staff, and this number rises to 63% for first-year students. Similarly, 55% of first-year students never discussed course topics or ideas with academic staff outside of class and for all students that number averages 46%.

The literature is replete with evidence of how SFI encourages students to devote greater effort to educationally purposeful activities during college, which in turn, increases students' academic self-confidence, academic self-concept, and self-motivation (Astin, 1993; Endo & Harpel, 1982; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979). SFI in and outside of the classroom has more influence on student outcomes than what students do and where they go to college (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Kuh & Hu, 2001). It was therefore perplexing and concerning to me as a teacher as to why the SFI index, as measured in the ISSE, is year on year consistently the lowest of all the indicators of SE.

However, low levels of SFI are not just a feature of Irish HE; as this is borne out in the results of surveys of SE internationally, revealing SFI consistently ranking as the lowest of the engagement indices (Kuh & Kinzie, 2018; ISSE, 2017). However, Irish students report lower levels of SFI than their counterparts in both the US and the UK (Buckley, 2014). Critically though, what is most concerning is the low level of interaction reported by first-year students in Irish HE (ISSE, 2017). This is not surprising as research confirms that the frequency of SFI increases as students progress through college (Kuh & Hu, 2001) but it is problematic, however, when considered alongside the increased risk of dropout among undergraduates in the first two years of college (Sosu & Pheunpha, 2019; Ortiz & Dehon, 2013).

While the literature has provided robust evidence of the link between SFI

and student outcomes in college, significant gaps in our understanding of SFI remain (Cotten & Wilson, 2006). While quantitative studies have confirmed the pivotal role that high SFI plays in student success, it is less clear *where* and *in what circumstances* this phenomenon plays out (Terenzini et al., 1981 cited in Cotten & Wilson, 2006 emphasis added). We need to understand more about the *why* of interactions, the underlying patterns (Terenzini et al.,1995) and the *how* of interactions, the dynamic processes (Kuh & Hu, 2001) that can explain the statistical associations between student interactions with faculty and student outcomes. The apparent lack of insight on why and how students interact with academic staff may be reflective of a more general lack of clarity on the criteria for, and effectiveness of, engagement policies and the carelessness with which engagement is treated (Baron & Corbin, 2012).

### 1.5 Listening to student perspectives on engagement

Ashwin (2012) is critical of research that focuses on the processes of teaching and learning rather than teaching-learning interactions. This, he argues, reflects a tendency in the literature to background the dynamic, complex and shifting nature of those interactions in favour of foregrounding more static and stable processes (Ashwin, 2012). His criticism could be levelled at the ISSE as the questions focus primarily on the processes of teaching and learning and less on the nature of interactions. Those questions that address SFI ask students to report their frequency and students' perceptions of the quality of the interactions with staff, neither of which offer any insights as to 'why' and 'how' students interact with staff. The pivotal role that interactions with academic staff in particular play in engaging students in their studies provided my starting point for exploring the how and why of SE in Irish HE. Additionally, responding to Ashwin's

(2009) concerns, this study ensured that the influence of structure and agency was foregrounded within the context which most impacts on SE, that is, the classroom.

It is important, however, to point out that while the low levels of SFI prompted the study, this simply provided the impetus for exploring more generally what students in Irish HE consider institutions do best to engage them in their studies. SFI in itself is not the problem, rather it is simply a symptom of a broader issue in HE where discourses of 'learner-centeredness' and 'learner autonomy' are increasingly used to justify the limited resources available for teaching, leading to a culture of self-directed learning where increasingly students are expected to learn on their own (Ashwin, 2006).

Using the qualitative data submitted by students in the open-ended questions in the ISSE, this research responds by investigating what lies behind the low levels of SFI in Irish HE. The results draw on the students' own words to explain the underlying conditions that enable SFI, findings that can elucidate what engages the diversity of students in Irish HE institutions. Crucially, however, the findings signpost those quality hot spots that students identify as in need of improvement. The student recommendations for action, foregrounded in the discussion chapter, function as authentic student feedback that can guide the development of institutional structures and actions in response to student concerns (Hunt, 2011, p.17).

Addressing the gaps in our understanding necessitates a more nuanced, less formulaic approach to conceptions of SE where direct dialogue with students can be transformational (Lawson & Lawson, 2013). My research addresses the need to understand the individual experiences of our diverse student bodies and

to include the often-excluded student voice (Trowler, 2010) in the dialogue about engagement. In doing so, this research exposes the unresolved methodological issues and conflicts that beleaguer this nebulous, weakly theorised concept (Kahn, 2013). This presents challenges for researchers trying to make sense of this complex construct (Barkley, 2010; Bryson & Hardy, 2014; Christenson et al., 2012). Additionally, it has led to the blurring of the boundaries between student voice and SE (Seale et al., 2014; Trowler, 2010).

Drawing on what students say in their own words engages them, I searched for clues that could explain why teachers and students in Irish HE appear not to be talking to each other. Throughout the research I have been committed to starting and ending with the perspectives of students themselves, mindful that my own role as a lecturer could result in a study that is based on a set of elite values, attitudes, and epistemologies that make more sense to HE 'gate keepers' than they do to many of its students (Haggis, 2003, p.102).

The study is guided by the following two research questions:

> **Research Question 1.** (RQ1) What can the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) qualitative comments tell us about what students consider engages them?
>
> **Research Question 2.** (RQ2) In what contexts do students and teachers interact and what is the nature and quality of these interactions?

### 1.6 Thesis structure

Chapter 1 has set the scene for the investigation that follows. SE was presented as key to the achievement of tertiary education outcomes for an increasingly diverse cohort of students. Understanding how to support the myriad needs of traditional and non-traditional cohorts is challenging for institutions when funding has not kept pace with burgeoning enrolments. Decades of research on

the SE phenomenon has failed to elucidate this nebulous and under-theorised metaconstruct. As an engagement indicator, SFI matters more than what students do while in college or where they go to college (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Kuh & Hu, 2001). Yet, students in Irish HE interact infrequently with academics, and less frequently than their peers in both the UK and US (Buckley, 2014). I view this as a symptom of a broader issue around student capacity to interact with their teachers which stymies their opportunities to actively engage in their studies. While quantitative indices in the ISSE count how often interactions happen, students' qualitative responses provide descriptive information on the causes and contexts for the quantitative results.

Chapter 2 provides the background and context for this study. The Irish HE landscape is described and how the student voice is conceived in policy and practice. The origins and aims of the mandatory ISSE are described and presented in the context of the national strategy for HE. The structure of the survey and how engagement indicators are calculated is detailed and the open-ended questions in it, the responses to which, comprise the secondary data source for the study, are presented.

Chapter 3 is a literature review that discusses the engagement phenomenon with particular emphasis on its widely used measurement instrument, the NSSE. Surveys as student voice are explored leading to a discussion on the emancipatory dimensions of student voice and the concept of students as partners (SaP). Any discussion of the emancipatory aims of HE cannot escape a discussion of how power is wielded in hierarchical structures. The influence of institutional habitus is juxtaposed with students' social and cultural capital and the influence of structure and agency on students' willingness

and capacity to engage. Assessment as an instrument of disciplinary power is discussed and how equitable, rather than equal, relationships with students can be realised through a SaP approach.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodology and methods chosen as most appropriate to answer the research questions. The use of Critical Realism (CR) as a general methodological framework (Fletcher, 2016) and Mixed Methods, as the means of answering the research questions, is discussed. A flow chart provides a visual representation of the concurrent mixed methods approach and how CR influenced the study stages.

Chapter 5 presents the results compiled using a combination of human and computer assisted means in a process of triangulation of findings.

Chapter 6 discusses the findings and answers those questions posed in the introduction. The findings are linked to the literature review and existing knowledge about the SE phenomenon.

Finally, Chapter 7 provides discussion of the findings, draws the study to a conclusion and provides recommendations for actions that can address the student-led concerns identified. The limitations of the study are addressed and the signposts for further research are identified.

# Chapter 2 – Background and context of this study

## 2.1 Background to this study

Participation policies that have transformed HE from an elite to a mass system have unsurprisingly shifted responsibility for its financing from the state to the student (Tight, 2019). In what is now a mass and highly competitive HE market, students are often viewed as consumers of a service with the right to a voice in institutional governance and decision-making (Logermann & Leišytė, 2015). As this transformation happened, it was inevitable that the role of the state would also change, leading to greater concern about accountability in funding and greater influence in how these funds are used (Tight, 2019). However, as HE has expanded, traditional elitist policies and perspectives have failed to evolve to better serve less affluent students (Goldrick-Rab as cited in Fitzpatrick et al., 2020). Disproportionate numbers of those who drop out of college are from historically underserved groups, leading some to posit that the odds are stacked against them (Nelson et al., 2008). However, decades of research on student persistence in college have identified the significant compensatory effects of the SE phenomenon, since what students do in college has more influence on their learning than where they go to college or their background characteristics (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Kuh & Hu, 2001). Against this backdrop, the SE phenomenon has gained increasing prominence. While few terms in the lexicon of HE are invoked more frequently and in more varied ways than SE, there is much we still do not know about it (Axelson & Flick, 2010). Emphasising that there are some things that we think we know but may have got wrong, Axelson and Flick argue that we need to understand why some students or groups of students disengage under certain circumstances, and, more crucially, what we can do to prevent that

happening (Axelson and Flick, 2010, p.39). As a concept, SE is largely misunderstood by institutional leaders, resulting in inadequate measurement and observation of engagement on campuses (Quaye et al., 2019). They note that rarely do scholars view the engagement phenomenon through a critical lens, thus rendering educators ill-equipped to critique or disrupt hegemonic notions of who the engaged students are and the opportunities that are afforded to them (Patton et al., 2016). Vibert & Sheilds' (2003) three lens perspectives on engagement as ideology is useful to consider at this point.

### 2.1.1 SE as ideology

Despite the lack of consensus on how SE is defined, SE is an inescapably ideological term, that when separated from its social, cultural and political contexts, ignores deeply embedded understandings about the nature of engagement itself (Vibert & Sheilds, 2003, p.225). Their (Vibert & Sheilds) experience of working on a national study of SE demonstrated that "ideology does matter, and, further, that educational rhetoric is irreducibly ideological and political, perhaps never more so than when it pretends neutrality" (Vibert & Sheilds, 2003, p.237). The study carried out on SE in schooling in Canada (Smith, Donahue, & Vibert, 1998), revealed that increasingly educators were seeking rational, technical and rapid solutions to what were deeply rooted and pervasive educational problems. The outcomes of this study and the authors' review of the literature revealed what they argued were three distinct perspectives on engagement. These are a rational-technical perspective, an interpretive perspective and a critical perspective, the latter by far the least common (Vibert & Sheilds, 2003, p.227).

The rational-technical lens views engagement as a set of approaches to teaching that are effective in transmitting a fixed curriculum efficiently to the largest number of students. The interpretive/student centred lens comprises beliefs that focus on the student as a self-directed individual, aware of their strengths and weaknesses who self-regulate their behaviour in pursuit of success. The critical/transformative lens, which the authors noted as rarely in evidence, views education as a process of individual transformation and is premised on values of democratic schooling, necessitating students having both the right and opportunity to participate. Vibert and Sheilds concluded that 'student engagement' as presented in the literature is a misnomer as it implies that it is located within students, when their results showed that students, like teachers, are engaged when schools are engaging places to be (Smith et al., 1998 in Vibert & Sheilds, 2003, p.236). The route to ensuring that schools are engaging places is the adoption of critical pedagogies that are grounded in the lives and experiences of students. Critical pedagogy approaches, associated with Freire (1996; 2005) amongst many others, share a common belief that education and society are intrinsically inter-related and the fundamental purpose of education is to improve social justice (McArthur, 2010, p.493). Critical pedagogy denotes a commitment to critiquing existing approaches to teaching in favour of increased freedom for students to "make choices and decisions about their own learning, a more dialogic student-teacher relationship, and a shift to viewing the learner as a competent contributor to education" (Bovill, 2013; Giroux, 1983 cited in Bovill, 2020). This study positions students as competent contributors on decisions about their teaching and learning experiences by giving voice to the thousands of feedback comments they have submitted over the first seven years of the

ISSE. Critical pedagogies have change as their aim but, as Fullan (1999) notes, for change to occur we must be willing to engage with diversity and conflict, connectedness and coherence" (Fullan, 1999, p.29).

## 2.2 The study context: higher education in Ireland

SE, while eluding an agreed definition, is shaped by the multiple contexts in which it is played out (Baron & Corbin, 2012; Vuori, 2014). This section explains the context for the study and the nature of state funding of HE in Ireland. Up until 2019, Irish HE comprised seven universities, fourteen institutes of technology, seven colleges of education, and a number of small, specialised, institutions. In 2019, in line with Government policy, three institutes of technology (Dublin, Tallaght and Blanchardstown) merged to form Technological University Dublin, thereby increasing the number of universities to eight and reducing institutes of technology to eleven. The split of students attending university versus other institutes or colleges is approximately 60:40, and the number of students in each institute type ranges from 3,000 in the smallest to 20,000 in the largest.

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is responsible for establishing statutory quality assurance (QA) guidelines for HE and for reviewing institutional QA procedures. Including student voices in policy and planning is a key aim of QQI, and consultation with students in QA is protected in legislation, which is in line with the emphasis across post-secondary education in Europe on student participation in QA (Carey, 2018). Students participate in QA processes and procedures through their membership on the Board and Committees of QQI. At institutional level, student representation in governance is protected in the *Universities Act 1997* and the *Institutes of Technology Act 2006.* In both cases, students sit on governing bodies and academic councils, and student class

representatives sit on all faculty and programme boards. This is in line with the Bologna Process' (2012–2015) priority of involving students and staff in governance structures at all levels (Pabian & Minksova, 2011). The inclusion of student voices was further consolidated in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 report (Hunt, 2011), and the recommendations that led to the development and rollout of the ISSE. This study contributes to that aim by listening to the voices of the many thousands of students who have described 'what is best' and 'what could improve' about how their institutions engage them in their studies.

### 2.3 Engaging the student voice

Despite the notable absence in the literature of reference to the role that students can play in enabling SE (Naylor & Mifsud, 2019), where roles are discussed, they are differentiated according to how the power and authority to act is shared between students and institutions. Students' ability to influence engagement can be viewed as a four-part continuum of student power and agency ranging from students as evaluators at one end, to participants, partners and co-creators, or ultimately as change agents (Carey, 2013; Kay et al., 2010). As evaluators, students provide feedback at a national, regional, and institutional level to those that have responsibility for quality assurance. Increasingly, this feedback takes the form of SE surveys, with the data collected functioning as a proxy measure for the quality of the education being delivered (Trowler, 2010).

Ireland's annual mandatory survey, ISSE, is premised on what is arguably the dominant view of SE, the behavioural perspective. This can be summarised broadly as the time and effort that students expend in high-impact practices that have been linked to student success (Kuh, 2009). As a student voice instrument,

the NSSE and its progeny worldwide encourage students to “have their say” by focusing on the institutional conditions that allow students to engage in practices that enhance their learning. Engaging the student voice through surveys that seek their legitimate perspectives and opinions offers students the possibility of participating in decisions about their education – assuming their feedback is listened to and acted upon.

However, there is scepticism about whether these widely used systems of feedback are truly representative of all voices; the assumption that quantitative surveys allow every voice to be heard, listened to, and acted upon is questionable. In hierarchical systems where competition between voices often exist, universities may have developed selective hearing, where the voice of the ruling stratum functions as the accepted voice, perhaps resulting in the voices of the marginalised being lost (Lygo-Baker et al., 2019). As Arnot and Reay (2007) argue, contemporary voice research recognises the power of research relationships and methods in framing particular voices, eliciting some and not others. Indeed, there is an acceptance among researchers that one authentic voice of a single social category does not exist. “Voice (power) sets limits on the range and potential of messages – interactional practices shape messages and can change voice and ultimately challenge power relations” (Arnot & Reay, 2007, p.323). Noting the importance of voice in education as a mainstay of emancipatory agendas in research, McLeod (2011), calls for the reframing of voice, not as a problem of expression and representation, but rather as one of listening, recognition, and student equity. This makes the notable absence of the student voice in the SE literature (Parsons & Taylor, 2011; Trowler, 2010) even more perplexing. As I reflected upon the fundamental need to open up a dialogue

with students to better explicate their experience and assumptions (Alexander, 2013), I was reminded of a book by one of my favourite authors, Agatha Christie.

Christie's book, *Why didn't they ask Evans* (Christie, 1934), has haunted me since I first pondered the question of what engages students in the Irish HE context. The plot of the book revolves around why the parlour maid, Gladys Evans, had not been asked to witness a will penned by millionaire John Savage on the night before he died. She was the only person in the household who had met Mr Savage that evening and was therefore the obvious person to ask to witness his last will and testament. However, this was precisely the reason that Gladys was not asked: she was sharp-witted and had good eyesight, and so would have immediately spotted that the man making the will was not Mr Savage at all. I was reminded of Gladys constantly as I searched the prolific body of literature that seeks to understand those conditions that best support SE and consider questions regarding it that still remain. Arguably, the people best placed to identify the enabling conditions and contexts that allow students to engage are students themselves, the voices that are often excluded from the conversation. Given the evidence from the literature, I wondered at the apparent exclusion of students in discussions on what best engages them. No one understands the student experience better than students. As legitimate informants (Feuerverger & Richards, 2007), their experience and expertise rests on them simply being students. They understand where they and their peers are coming from, and often where they are going (Cook-Sather, 2013a). "Yet students are often left out of the discourse on student engagement. Traditionally they are objectified and omitted from the dialogue because often they are viewed as products of formal education systems" (Zyngier, 2007, p.93).

While the rationale for listening to the student voice is often presented as part of a quality assurance agenda (Naylor & Mifsud, 2019), it is also anchored in arguments around the delivery of a more just and equitable educational system that breaks the cycle of social and cultural disadvantage (McLeod, 2011). As McLeod emphasises, students' aspirations for university are "no longer a given" and that "due to increased enrolment of different students, the challenge now is how to give greater voice to this difference" (Gale as cited in McLeod, 2011, p.180). Echoing Kahu's (2013) call for longitudinal qualitative approaches, what is required, McLeod argues, is a longer and wider view of student experiences. This, she argues, can help to elucidate the complex, subjective desires, and anxieties that fuel students' decisions to go to, remain at, or leave university. Listening to what students say in their open-ended comments also opens the door to the possibility of hearing multiple and dissonant voices (McLeod, 2011) and supports Kahn's (2013) thesis that, to serve the needs and aspirations of students, one needs to directly address the emancipatory dimensions of learning. It further addresses the moral imperative of a democratic educational system to engage teachers, students, and others in a rich and complex process of asking about, explaining, and listening to each other's perspectives (Collins et al., 2016, p.38). Drawing on the thousands of responses to the open-ended questions in the ISSE, this study exploited the rich secondary qualitative data to address those gaps in the literature and our understanding of SE that remain.

### 2.4 Data source

This research used the national ISSE datasets 2013–2019 inclusive. The survey invites all members of the target population to participate, and the units of observation are at an individual and institutional level using a method known as

Computer Assisted Self-Interviewing. Data is presented as responses to individual items and also as calculated scores that comprise the various indices that encompass broad aspects of SE, including Learning Strategies, Effective Teaching Practices, Student Faculty Interaction, and Quality of Interactions (See Appendix A for a full description of indices).

The original ISSE was modelled on the Australasian version of the NSSE, the AUSSE. Piloted in 2013, and rolled out across Irish HE in 2014, its original version comprised 100 questions, but following a review it was shortened and the revised version was rolled out in 2016. The survey, offered in English and Irish, targets all first and final year undergraduate students and all postgraduate taught students in Irish publicly funded HE, and since 2013 over 200,000 students have responded. Most of the survey questions relate to specific engagement indicators with final indices calculated from combinations of questions. Twenty-two of the sixty-seven questions in the survey are not linked to an indicator but are included for their intrinsic value and their contribution to a broad understanding of SE. The indicators are listed in Figure 1.

**Figure 1 –** ISSE indicators (2016)

| Higher Order Learning | Reflective and Integrative Learning | Quantitative Reasoning | Learning Strategies |
|---|---|---|---|
| Collaborative Learning | Student-Faculty Interaction | Effective Teaching Practices | Quality of Interactions |
| Supportive Environment | Other (non-indicator) question items | | |

The open-ended questions were retained in the revised survey, although with some changes in wording. Table 1 includes the original and revised versions.

**Table 1 –** ISSE open-ended questions

| Open-ended questions (2013–2015) | Open-ended questions (2016–2019) |
|---|---|
| What are the BEST ASPECTS of how your institution engages students in learning? | What does your institution do best to engage students' in learning? |
| What could be done to IMPROVE how your institution engages students? | What could your institutions do to improve students' engagement in learning? |

The quantitative indices in the ISSE are analysed centrally, and a national report is published each year. The qualitative data that is not analysed centrally is returned to the individual participating institutions for local analysis. The rationale for not conducting central analysis on the student comments is that they are most likely to be context-specific and therefore of most interest to the individual institutions. In contrast, Bryson (2014) argues that the standardisation of the NSSE fixed response questions for the purposes of generalisability loses sensitivity to local contexts and undermines the validity of responses. He opines that the NSSE survey closed questions give no voice to the student at all: rather "their perspectives are shoehorned to fit with no opportunity to present an alternative view on the issue" (Bryson, 2014, page 7).

That said, closed-ended (fixed-format) questions are often preferred by survey researchers as they are easier to ask, code, and analyse than their free-format counterparts (Schuman & Presser, 1981). Geer (1991), when posing the crucial question as to whether open-ended questions provide important insights about public opinion, reminds us that the preference for closed-ended questions did not evolve based on any data that cast doubt on the ability of open-ended

questions to measure attitudes accurately. Chambers and Chiang (2011), in outlining their rationale for the analysis of free text responses in the NSSE, argue that the NSSE quantitative data misses a considerable amount of in-depth information submitted by students in their own words, information that could provide insights to factors that impact on student learning, development, retention, and academic achievement. This position is supported by Zaitseva and Milsom who claim that "The open text comments constitute a rich source of student feedback with the potential to illuminate scores and to identify issues that fall through the gaps of the survey categories" (Zaitseva et al., 2013, p.226).

### 2.5 ISSE response rates

When using secondary data, it is important to examine the response rate to ensure the credibility of the research as low response rates may not be representative of the larger population and can dilute the reliability of the results. Since the ISSE pilot in 2013 and the subsequent full rollout of the survey in 2014–2019, over 200,000 students have responded to the annual web-based survey. The overall results and the numbers of students who responded to the open-ended questions 2013–2019 are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2** – ISSE responses by year

| Year | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Target population for survey** | 116,642 | 127,545 | 124,660 | 131,161 | 131,709 | 137,025 | 138,227 |
| Total responses | 12,762 | 19,844 | 27,359 | 29,173 | 35,850 | 38,371 | 40,558 |
| % of target population | 10.9% | 15.6% | 21.9% | 22.2% | 27.2% | 28.0% | 29.3% |
| **Institute "does Best" comments** | 5,993 | 10,089 | 12,265 | 15,102 | 18,561 | 19,255 | 20,480 |
| % of total responses | 47.0% | 50.8% | 44.8% | 51.8% | 51.8% | 50.2% | 50.5% |
| % of target population | 5.1% | 7.9% | 9.8% | 11.5% | 14.1% | 14.1% | 14.8% |
| **Institute "could improve" comments** | 5,293 | 9,303 | 11,387 | 14,275 | 17,545 | 18,212 | 19,364 |
| % of total responses | 41.5% | 46.9% | 41.6% | 48.9% | 48.9% | 47.5% | 47.7% |
| % of target population | 4.5% | 7.3% | 9.1% | 10.9% | 13.3% | 13.3% | 14.0% |
| **Comments in both questions** | 4,555 | 8,618 | 10,527 | 13,171 | 16,330 | 16,997 | 18,086 |
| % of total responses | 35.7% | 43.4% | 38.5% | 45.1% | 45.6% | 44.3% | 44.6% |
| % of target population | 3.9% | 6.8% | 8.4% | 10.0% | 12.4% | 12.4% | 13.1% |

Response rates to the survey have increased year on year, with 29.3% of the target population completing the survey in 2019. In total, over the seven years that the survey has been in existence, students have submitted 197,124 comments, all of which were analysed in the conduct of this study using a combination of manual and computer assisted means. For example, in the most recent dataset analysed (2019), of the 40,558 students who responded to the

survey, 20,480 (50.5%) added ‘does best’ comments and 19,364 (47.7%) added ‘could improve’ comments, which is consistent across all years. Furthermore, this translates to a response rate in the most recent dataset (2019) of approximately 14% of the target population. The overall response rate for the open ended questions compares favourably with the UK Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), where 57% of postgraduate students responded to at least one of the free text questions (Zaitseva & Milsom, 2016 p.9).

Literature warns us not to single-mindedly focus on response rates as an indicator of survey quality (Schouten et al.,2009) and population survey research can be limited by biases introduced through the exclusion of sub-populations from the sampling frame and by non-response bias (Rehm et al., 2021). However, the ISSE project are satisfied that the overall year on year responses to the survey are representative of the target population. The question might be asked however, if those students who responded to the survey are by dint of their engagement with the survey ‘more engaged’ than their non-respondent peers. However, the issue of non-response bias must always be considered so that the results of a study or an analysis are not wrongly attributed. However, in qualitative research the validity of the study does not rest on the researcher's ability to demonstrate representativeness with respect to the total population: rather, it rests on transferability whereby the researcher offers detailed description of the setting in which the research was undertaken. Where qualitative data is collected as part of a predominantly quantitative survey, it is possible to use the quantitative responses to characterise the nature of the group providing comments, and to make their relationship to the wider population apparent. This ensures that the ‘gems’ of information that are often found in the open-ended responses (Cohen

et al., 2011) from a subset of respondents are still valuable data even when they do not represent the entire sample (Lincoln, 2007).

## 2.6 Researcher's motivation and philosophical position

Palmer (1998, p.1) argues that as teachers, we teach who we are. As a lecturer in Irish HE, I derive immense pleasure from the interaction with my students, both inside and outside the classroom. If as a teacher, I teach who I am, then it follows that as a researcher, I research who I am. My interest in research is coloured by my own ontological position: my assumptions about the nature of existence, the structure of reality, my understanding of what constitutes knowledge, and what there is to know (Crotty, 1998). My interest in what engages students is grounded in my own philosophy of teaching as a dialogue between teacher and student, which, through explication, abolishes the distance between learning and understanding (Rancière, 1991, p.5). Dialogic teaching challenges the teacher to empower students so that they can overcome the limitations of their situations, rendering teaching a practice of freedom (Freire, 1996).

As a researcher, I am forced to consider, and indeed make transparent, the values and beliefs that I personally hold, alongside my beliefs about the nature of being and assumptions about the nature of knowledge. My approach to this research unavoidably reflects my own epistemological stance and the values and beliefs that underpin my practice as a lecturer in Irish HE. In this regard, I find that I am at one with David Carr, who argues that the values of teaching should be regarded as "principled dispositions" (Carr, 2011, p.171). Fullan (1982) argues that these principled dispositions are more important now in an era of free market fundamentalism, which seeks to make HE a corporate enterprise through what Giroux (2002) describes as the most dangerous ideology of our times,

neoliberalism. In neoliberal ideology, a professional culture of intellectual inquiry and debate is replaced by one of performativity, with an emphasis on strategic planning, performance indicators, audits, and measurable outputs (Morrissey, 2013). However, the fact is that teachers tend not to respond to changes in curriculum or practices unless they share the values and beliefs that underpin them (Fullan, 1982). Giroux, drawing on Agamben (1998), identifies a new form of “bare pedagogy . . . focused on market-driven competitiveness and even militaristic goal setting, while critical pedagogy with its emphasis on the hard work of critical analysis, moral judgements, and social responsibility . . . withers” (Giroux, 2010, p.184). I was interested to know if the way students in Irish HE spoke about their experiences was reflective of a “bare pedagogy” devoid of affect and concern for the student as an individual. As a lecturer, I am conscious that the questions I pose and that any lens employed in my analysis (Brookfield, 2009) might be blurred by the fog of insiderism (Merton, 1972), limiting my capacity to position myself as an outsider in a bid to make the familiar strange.

Although I am a lecturer researching student perspectives in Irish HE, I am both an outsider and an insider. As a teacher, I am an actor in the engagement experiences of students, albeit as an outsider on the other side of the desk. As a postgraduate student, I am an insider, and so can identify with sentiments expressed in many of the student comments. I am guided by the advice of Dwyer and Buckle (2009), who caution against viewing the issue as a dichotomous one but rather to consider the “space between” that allows researchers to occupy the position of both insider and outsider. As Rose (1985) reminds us, there is no such thing as neutrality; rather there are only greater or lesser awareness of our assumptions, and a failure to recognise what we are choosing to leave out means

that we are not fully in command of what we are doing. It is this approach that has guided my research, at all times conscious that my identity as a lecturer could colour and cloud my judgment, particularly when adopting interpretative approaches. However, equally influential on my reading and analysis of the student narratives was my own identity as a student, a past, current, and continuing learner.

## Chapter 3 – Literature review

*To rush into explanations is always a sign of weakness (Agatha Christie, The Seven Dials Mystery, 1929*).

### 3.1 Reviewing the literature – the search strategy

In advance of searching the educational databases, a Google Scholar search using 'student engagement' was conducted and produced 3.53 million results revealing the popularity of the engagement concept. A further search aimed at narrowing the results used 'student engagement' AND 'literature review' as the search term and produced 1.32 million results. The volume and variety of results confirmed the jingle, jangle, and conceptual haziness (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie,2012) of the engagement concept, necessitating the bracketing of research into categories. This confirmed the challenges of synthesising literature on engagement as a meta-construct (Kahu, 2013) and which has as its aim increased understanding a complex topic area critically and across many areas of research (Greenhalgh et al., 2004; 2005). A review of educational databases was conducted using the 'student' and 'engagement' search term. The three most popular databases were used - Academic Search Complete, British Education Index and Eric as these produced the most relevant results. Adding 'higher education OR college OR university OR post-secondary' increased the number of results produced.

### 3.2 Statement of the problem

Understanding how best to engage students is central to my personal belief in the importance of the teacher-student relationship (TSR) for student retention and success (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). The significance of the interpersonal relationship between students and teachers for students' in school

settings has been widely researched, yet fewer and more limited studies have been conducted in higher education. This may in part be due to the underutilisation of the opportunities the HE classroom offers as a key site for collegial and inclusive possibility and building relational pedagogies (Bovill, 2020) Calling for more research that focus on the TSR in HE, Hagenauer and Volet (2014) present three arguments for extending the field: Investigating the TSR can signpost reasons for dropout rates; developing more relational classroom environments can have positive effects on teachers' emotions and exploring the quality, establishment and effects of TSR can reveal their role as pre-conditions of excellent teaching (p.371).

Relationships are built on interactions and how often students interact with faculty is a measure of how involved students are in their institutions and studies. Involvement (Astin, 1984;1993) is a phenomenon that has been researched widely and defined in terms of student physical and psychosocial investment in college life and the corresponding gains in college outcomes (Mayhew et al., 2016). Astin (1993) described the highly involved student as devoting considerable time and energy in studying and campus activities, interacting frequently with faculty members. My surprise at the interaction statistics further confirmed my own conscious, and perhaps subconscious, belief in the link between student interactions with teachers and their active engagement with their studies (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Kim & Sax, 2009; Kuh & Hu, 2001).This prompted me to seek explanations for the low levels of student-faculty interaction as reported in the ISSE, interrogating the data it produced, searching for clues that could signpost how increased teacher student interaction and involvement could lead to a better experience for all.

### 3.3 Defining Student Engagement (SE)

Despite being described as the holy grail of learning (Sinatra et al.,2015), SE remains a nebulous and under theorised concept (Zepke, 2018; Kahn, 2013) and “to date we do not have access to a theory of engagement” (Boekaerts, 2016, p.76). The noted absence of definition in studies or any guiding theoretical framework (Bond et al., 2020) may be contributing to the lack of clarity (Fredericks et al., 2004). Evidence for this can be found in Boekaerts (2016) paper in a special issue of the Learning and Instruction journal (2016; vol.43) that focuses on theoretical and methodological advances in SE. Boekaerts remarks on the absence of conceptual clarity or consensus on the meaning or boundaries of the engagement construct, noting that most of the authors did not provide a working definition of engagement. Conscious of Boekaerts observation, I wanted to make explicit my own theory of SE and how I define it. I am conscious that for me, teaching is an exercise in interdependence between myself and my students, underpinned by the fundamental belief that social bonds are the basis of human conduct (Bowlby,1979). This represents a personal principled disposition as opposed to a principled commitment and no doubt influences how I approach my practice and my research. The sample of the student open-ended comments from the ISSE in Figure 2 capture those professional qualities, attitudes and behaviours that students consider to be most engaging.

**Figure 2** – Student open-ended comments (ISSE, 2017)

| What is **Best** Comments (2017) | What **could Improve** Comments (2017) |
|---|---|
| A **brilliant relationship** with the lecturers that makes us want to go to lectures and **feel like we can talk to our lecturers about our learning** | Better **student/staff relations** |
| A **friendly peer to peer relationship with lecturers** provides **a comfortable learning environment.** | **A tutor,** for example, in a tutorial class to begin the **class asking students about themselves, learning names and things** like that **so students feel** as though they have a **relationship** with their tutor |
| **Positive** student-student and student-lecture/tutor **relationships**. **Active, participatory** tutorials. **Encourages collaboration.** | **Improve relationships** between **lecturers and students**<br>Be a bit more **relational** and not so distant |

The student 'best' and 'could improve' comments confirm the interdependent, relational nature of teaching (Bovill, 2020) and informed the development of a student-led working definition of SE. These, and the thousands of similar comments, which when synthesised with my own experience, led me to define engagement as follows.

> Student engagement is predicated on, and realised through, an inherently relational and reciprocal process of teaching and learning

The definition draws on the traditional view of engagement (Fredericks et al., 2004; Kahu, 2013), as contingent upon teaching and learning approaches, those aspects of the construct measured in NSSE and the ISSE. However, the affective emotional aspects of engagement, realised and evidenced in an inherently reciprocal and relational view of teaching and learning, are prioritised in my adopted definition.

The emotional or affective side of learning and teaching have largely been neglected in the HE literature (Quinlan, 2016) and in particular emotional engagement is a critical but often overlooked aspect of learning and transition

into university (Kahu, 2014, p.46). For Kahu, emotional engagement comprises two elements, interest and belonging, and her research focused on identifying antecedents and consequences of this in the first-year student cohort. It is important that all students feel like they belong in HE and this need is accentuated (Kahu, 2014) during times of emotional volatility such as the transition into college. Strayhorn (2012) reminds us that belonging is a basic human need, essential for human functioning and critical for students' learning and development yet little research has been conducted on students' sense of belonging in college (Freeman et al., 2007). She (Strayhorn) further argues that everyone needs to belong but that this need to belong is heightened in contexts where students are liable to feel invisible, lonely or alienated. In their study of undergraduate students Freeman et al., (2007) found that students' sense of class belonging was associated with their academic self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation.

My working definition of SE draws on the scholarship that evaluates SE along behavioural, cognitive and affective/emotional dimensions, and the literature review synthesises and critiques the associated scholarship. However, employing an equity-oriented lens, the *reciprocal* reference recognises the opportunities and rights of students to be engaged in the design and delivery of their learning (Quaye, Harper & Pendakur, 2019). It follows then that this review addresses the link between student voice and SE. This leads into a brief exploration of the perceived structural deficits embedded in post-secondary institutions (Quaye, Harper & Pendakur, 2019), and the influence of institutional policies on students' capacity to engage and exercise personal agency. This is

intended to provide a counter narrative to the problematising of students that Quaye et al., (2019) observe is often evident in SE literature.

### 3.4 Conceptions of SE

While SE remains a nebulous and under theorised construct, conceptions of SE in HE can be influenced by two critical features: the first is the amount of time and effort students expend on educationally purposeful activities; and the other is how institutions deploy their resources, organise the curriculum and support services to induce students to engage (Kuh et al.,2007). However, as many authors have argued, there is no one size fits all approach to SE (Zepke, 2014; 2015; Quaye et al., 2019; Trowler, 2010): rather what is required are approaches that are context specific and respond to the needs of a diverse HE population. These arguably competing views, have resulted in a vagueness that allows the term to denote SE in learning activities, in the development of curricula, in quality assurance processes and in institutional governance (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015, p.343).

In Irish HE, the context for this research, there has been a conscious decision to track SE to develop a fuller understanding of the student experience beyond that ascertained through satisfaction surveys alone (ISSDA, 2020). This is reflected in two national initiatives, the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) and the Irish Survey of Student Engagement, (ISSE). Launched in 2016, NStEP is a joint initiative between the Union of Students of Ireland (USI) and QQI aimed at strengthening SE in decision making. Founded on the principles of partnership between staff and students, it builds capacity through student training programmes and practice-based projects, its work informing policy development. Essentially, the ISSE and NStEP function as

complementary SE programmes; the survey canvasing feedback from the wider student body and NStEP actively developing and supporting student representatives. Taken together, the two programmes encompass the national policy on SE in Irish HE, reflecting the value that is placed on students as stakeholders in shaping their HE learning. Both initiatives are designed to promote partnership and foster a community culture in institutions where student involvement is considered, appropriate, natural, and expected (Bovill et al., 2016). My own definition of SE reflects this approach and analysing the corpus comments in the ISSE allows me to explore student self-reported behaviours in HE, but also those contextual factors that enable or induce their engagement (Kuh et al., 2007).

### 3.5 The origins and rise of the SE concept

The popularity of the SE concept can be traced to the unprecedented increase in HE participation globally, from a baseline of 13 million in 1960 to a predicted 262 million in 2025 (Altbach et al., 2009). This exponential expansion has been accompanied by a transformation in the profile of the HE student, following the Bologna Accord's (1999) commitment to increasing participation among non-traditional students and underserved communities across Europe. Increasingly, institutions and governments are just as concerned with retaining students to successful completion of their studies, as they are about providing access for students into HE (National Audit Office, 2007). While widening participation is a laudable objective, it presents challenges for providers who struggle to meet the needs of a heterogeneous student population in an era of decreasing state funding, a challenge that is evidenced by a marked increase in student attrition (McCoy & Byrne, 2017). When students fail to achieve their

goals, whatever those goals may be, the opportunity costs for the individual, the institution and those governments who fund HE, are inestimable.

The question of why and how students persist towards graduation remains largely unanswered. A large body of international research and theory highlights the range of individual, social, and organisational factors that impact on student retention in college (Tinto 1975; 1993; Astin 1984; Pascarella & Terenzini 1991; Thomas, 2002; 2012).

> Dropping out is not necessarily an indication of the individual student's failure, but high drop-out rates may well indicate that the education system is not meeting the needs of students (OECD, 2008, p.94).

Although dropout rates in both the UK and Ireland have remained relatively stable over the years, there is concern that rates of progression should not worsen (Hunt, 2011; Thomas, 2012). Irish HE research confirms that dropout is highly influenced by socio-economic status, with higher levels of drop out amongst underrepresented groups (Fleming et al., 2017). Similar results were found in the UK where the least advantaged students had consistently lower attainment and progression outcomes even after controlling for contributing factors (HEFCE, 2013; 2014). Access without support is not opportunity: too many low-income students who enter college find the support they need to succeed is lacking, their rates of completion lagging behind their affluent peers (Engstrom &Tinto, 2008). Challenged by the twin objectives of expanding access while maintaining quality, policy makers are seeking ways to ensure that students who enter HE are retained and leave with a qualification, with much of policy looking to the potential of SE to achieve same.

### 3.6 SE and the student experience

The importance of the SE concept in government and policy circles both at national and EU levels, has prompted a prolific body of research that is heterogeneous in nature, explores diverse interpretations of SE, employs different units of analysis, and examines the SE concept at varying levels of complexity and scale (Trowler, 2010). Research into SE essentially comprises two strands, one, originating primarily in North America, that focuses on desirable student learning behaviours (Astin 1993; Zepke, 2015; Kuh et al., 2008), and the other that concerns itself more with students' emotional belonging and agency (Kahu, 2013, Thomas, 2012; Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Literature reviews on the SE topic identify more than 2,000 published articles (Haggis, 2009; Trowler, 2010; Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2012). In the most widely cited review, Trowler (2010) highlighted that the bulk of the SE literature is focused on theorising and applying strategies for increasing SE, based on tenets such as active learning, experiential learning, and students as 'co-producers'. For the purposes of her literature review Trowler understood SE to be:

> the investment of time, effort and other relevant resources by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students, and the performance and reputation of the institution (Trowler, 2010, p.6).

Citing the wide body of literature (Astin, 1984; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Tinto, 1997; Kuh et al, 2005) that supports robust connections between student behaviours and positive outcomes, Trowler (2010) acknowledges the domination of quantitative studies. These, conducted mostly in the United States, focus on the behavioural, cognitive and affective engagement dimensions (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Kahu, 2013; Zepke, 2014; Ashwin and

McVitty, 2015) locating it within classroom practice and cause and effect connections between pedagogical approaches and student outcomes. Engagement then functions as the active verb between the curriculum and actual learning and the “proximal processes that ecological models posit are the primary engines of development (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012, p.23).

Having excluded qualitative studies due to their failure to meet the test for robustness, Trowler (2010) called for more robust qualitative research that could challenge, confirm or redefine the concept, producing a more integrated picture of SE. A more integrated picture informed by qualitative studies has emerged since then but the complex and diverse nature of the SE phenomenon renders any single generic definition blind to individual, cultural, discipline and historical differences (Zepke, 2018). Consequently, this picture resists defining engagement preferring instead to use it as a lens through which to discover what leads and follows quality learning and teaching both before and after classroom experiences, ever cognisant that SE is shaped by unique contexts (Zepke, 2018).

### 3.7 Towards a universal understanding

Many have sought to refine the SE concept condensing the SE phenomenon to encompass student time and effort spent in educationally purposeful activities, empirically linked to desirable outcomes. Kuh’s US based work (2001, 2009) receiving widespread acceptance in this regard. This led to a body of literature that claims a straightforward cause and effect relationship between teaching and learning approaches, and institutional quality. Nevertheless, despite the apparent lack of an agreed definition of SE, the teaching strategies identified as effective and the corresponding behavioural orientations were embraced throughout the United States, where most of the

research was carried out. Recent studies also confirm the link between pedagogical approaches, specific student behaviours, and SE (Evans et al., 2015). This preference for pedagogical solutions that are behaviourally based can be traced back to Tinto's seminal work (1987) on student attrition identifying teaching, academic success, anxiety and motivation as contributing to student belonging. Acceptance of these views of SE spread globally to a point where SE is no longer questioned (Trowler, 2010). Bryson's (2014) literature review aimed at mapping SE conceptually and articulating key underpinning principles encountered challenges. This problem, Bryson argues, results in SE reviews adopting a narrow research basis. He points to Trowler's (2010) inherently flawed rejection of almost all of the qualitative research studies on SE arguing that these diverse perspectives reflect the diversity of students themselves and the various research approaches employed. A plethora and diversity of studies challenged Bryson's attempts to clarify the concept, offering him no coherent path through the complexity. Nevertheless, he drew together overarching models that address the myriad of issues that relate to SE. He specifically explored how the dominant paradigm, the NSSE which emphasises what students do in college (Kuh, 2001) came to influence SE in Australia and subsequently in HE contexts across the globe.

## 3.8 The rush to measurement of the SE concept – the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

As Bryson (2014) and Trowler (2010) note, research on SE is dominated by a body of North American literature linked to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The widespread acceptance of the SE concept prompted a need to more fully understand the processes that support engagement, and

despite mixed evidence, research confirmed a link between desirable learning outcomes, engagement, and academic performance (Carini et al., 2006). This acceptance of a causal relationship provided the impetus for the development of a scale to measure it. The SE movement in the US was anxious to develop a tool that could serve to operationalise and measure SE in HE. Drawing on the principles of good undergraduate education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987), the NSSE was developed to measure generic indicators of institutional and student quality. The NSSE claims to be an empirically derived survey instrument with psychometric properties that possess strong face and construct validity and good reliability (Kuh, 2009). Since then, it has spawned several versions outside of the US that have been adapted to suit national contexts and is administered annually to colleges across America, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, China, South Africa, the UK and Ireland. In all cases a localised version of the survey is employed but, in the main, all surveys employ the NSSE questions and engagement indicators.

The survey has three stated purposes: to provide data that institutions could use to improve the student experience; to help identify effective educational practice; and, crucially; to promote the NSSE and the concept of engagement to the public and wider stakeholder base through the provision of statistically based conceptions of institutional quality. Taken together, through the repeated and well publicised reporting of the survey results, the validity and value of the survey's process indicators as proxies for learning success could be realised (Kuh, 2009). Viewing the NSSE through Vibert and Sheilds' (2003) three ideological lenses, the NSSE, due to its emphasis on specific engagement behaviours, could be

viewed as a rational-technical instrument, while its focus on what the student does could render it as interpretive-student centred.

In Australia, Henry Coates became the leading proponent of a NSSE approach to the measurement of SE, developing the Australian version of the survey, the AUSSE. Coates is clear in his assertion that students are agents of their own engagement, an assumption that underpins the questions and indices in the NSSE and the AUSSE. It is student purposeful actions that produce the learning that leads to student engagement which is measured as an outcome in the NSSE and all its derivative versions. Coates's perspective is relevant to this study given that the ISSE is based on the AUSSE. A staunch advocate of the AUSSE's value, Coates argues that "it provides key insights into what students are actually doing, a structure for framing conversations about quality, and a stimulus for guiding new thinking about best practice" (Coates, 2008, p.2). Kahn (2013) takes issue with Coates (2006) assertions about the inherent value, generalisability and sensitivity of the NSSE/AUSSE as he (Kahn) rightly argues, that it downplays the student's own role in shaping their own engagement (2013, p.1006).

### 3.8.1 Criticism of the NSSE

Several prominent studies have identified technical concerns regarding the construct validity of rating instruments (Darwin, 2020) and not everyone agrees with Coates and Kuh's assertions of the suitability and reliability of the NSSE for measuring what is a complex concept. Criticisms of survey instruments and the SE concept have emerged in recent years raising questions around what constitutes high impact pedagogies (Kuh, 2008) and how they are operationalised across the domains in diverse disciplines (MacFarlane &

Tomlinson, 2017). Critics question the lack of theoretical justification for the choice of the domains in the survey with Porter (2011) arguing "that the NSSE serves as a model for college student surveys" but that "under close examination, its validity argument fails, thus calling into question most college student surveys used in the field of post-secondary research" (Porter 2011, p.33). This, he argues, leads in most post-secondary SE research instruments employed to rely on the NSSE assumptions about human cognition, use the same types of vaguely worded questions, and often have low reliabilities. He questions the reliability of the scales as benchmarks for institutional quality, citing research that suggests survey responses may vary by individual characteristics and the accuracy of individual recall. He posits that students labelled as SE underperformers based on their scale results may simply not understand the wording in the survey. Student comments added in the ISSE counter Porter's argument as their pointed and appropriate nature evidence clear understanding of the questions being asked and the broader SE concept measured in the survey (Kuh, 2009). Others disagree. Pike's (2013) paper confirms the validity of the instrument and highlights flawed approaches to the analysis of the indices. He stresses that the survey captures clusters of good educational practice to be used as a starting point for more detailed examination of the same, a recommendation to which this study responds. (Carini et al.,2006) revealed weak associations between the NSSE benchmarks and student achievement with others bemoaning the lack of evidence linking NSSE data to objective outcomes such as student completion rates and/or grade point average (Gordon et al., 2007).

Korzekwa (2010) disputes the survey's predictive validity and crucially the reliability of students' ability to self-report the skills they have used or acquired.

This is despite evidence that student self-reports are valid and reliable under certain conditions (Carini et al., 2006). Prominent among this literature is Pace's work (1985). He argues that, amongst other factors, the likelihood of good returns from self-report surveys is enhanced when: questions are phrased clearly and unambiguously; the information requested is known by the students; students perceive the topic to be important meriting thoughtful answers; and student perceptions of the source of inquiry and the likely use or value of the results. Nevertheless, the capacity of students to interpret terms such as 'thinking critically and analytically' has also been questioned (Brogt & Comer, 2013). The Irish data does not support Korzekwa's (2010) and Brogt and Comer's (2013) claims. Not only do the responses to the open questions provide evidence of students' ability to analyse their experience and unpick the SE phenomenon, the capacity to think critically, evaluate their experiences and create solutions is also clear (Bloom, 1956). Table 3 provides examples of comments from the 2017 dataset with demographic detail added that show the age, year of study, and institute type of the students. While this research did not aim to explore differences in SE between groups, adding them here demonstrates the breath of opinion across groups.

**Table 3** – ISSE comments that mention critical thinking

| Critical thinking/ analysis references | | Demographic |
|---|---|---|
| What is Best (2017) | Challenges students to be critical of all materials as a core means of achieving high grades, uncritical analyses are marked down | Female, Uni., Under 23, UG, Year 4 |
| What is Best (2017) | By generating scientific arguments in a real-life way and engaging students through questions which stimulate thought and critical thinking | Male, Uni., Under 23, UG, Year 4 |
| What is Best (2017) | Critically discuss issues. Make us think about what's going on and try to promote social justice and change within our society | Female, Uni., Under 23, UG, Year 4 |
| What could Improve (2017) | Making classes smaller, allows for more interaction and thus more critical thinking. Very intimidating in front of hundreds of people. | Female, Uni., Over 23, UG, Year 4 |
| What could improve (2017) | I think feedback is a critical part in the learning process. It is hard to improve if you don't know what you are doing wrong. I have received very little feedback on anything over the years and I think this is in part owing to large numbers but nevertheless I would like to see that change | Female, IoT, Over 23, UG, Year 5 |

**Table 3 key:** 2017 data set. Sex - Male/Female**.** University - Uni. Institute of Technology – IOT. Age - Under 23, over 23. UG - Undergraduate (Year 1-4). PG - Postgraduate.

### 3.8.2 Criticism of the AUSSE

Critics of the AUSSE, the Australian version of the NSSE survey on which the ISSE is based, have raised concerns around the capacity of an instrument developed for a U.S population to accurately conceptualise and measure SE across different contexts. Brogt and Comer (2013) & Hagel et al (2012) question the wisdom of borrowing a U.S survey as they argue that this ignores the contextual differences between the HE systems. They are particularly concerned that the data obtained from the AUSSE be treated with care, cautioning against its misuse by policy makers and university management. Advocating for prudent internal use of the data by universities, they cite Carle et al. (2009) who advise

looking beyond the scales to unmask areas that may need improvement. The aims of this study respond to this advice by analysing the student open-ended comments to identify those aspects of the student experience that are most engaging and those areas of concern that need improvement.

The AUSSE critics, citing the work of McCormick et al (2008), point to the positive influence that residential campuses have on SE, a factor that would have little influence in Australia where 90% of the students commute to university and live at home or in shared accommodation. Supporting Hagel et al.'s (2012) thesis, Brogt and Comer (2013) in their study obtained data from the NSSE online report building tool against which they compared the response distributions and scale scores of the AUSSE New Zealand benchmark group (2009 & 2010). They found that New Zealand student scores for Academic challenge, Active learning, Student staff interactions, Enriching educational experiences, and Supportive learning, were all lower than those of their American peers. This, Brogt and Comer (2013) attributed to differences in educational pathways and cultures between the two countries.

This is important as the ISSE is based on the AUSSE. The ISSE project team adopted the AUSSE as it was felt that the HE contexts in Australasia and Ireland were similar. This argument has merit as students in Australasia, like their Irish peers, often live at home and commute to college unlike their peers in the US where students tend to live on campus. Additionally, questions have been raised about the impact of discipline differences on SE. Using analysis of variance and post-hoc procedures, Leach (2016) conducted a study in one institution to test the variability in scores on the AUSSE survey scales, revealing significant differences across disciplines. This raises concerns about the use of a 'one size

fits all' survey to accommodate the diversity of disciplinary teaching approaches. My research acknowledges these criticisms of the AUSSE and responds by going beyond the quantitative results and using the detailed analysis of the student authored free text comments to investigate the influence and impact of the HE context on how students engage.

What is striking about all criticisms of the NSSE and its progeny is their focus and emphasis on what the instrument claims to measure and how the survey results are interpreted while ignoring questions of SE as a process or an outcome (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012): NSSE, I argue, over-emphasises SE as an outcome and minimises the influence of the processes that facilitate SE.

### 3.8.3 Few alternatives to the 'snapshot' survey of student experience

Despite its critics, the NSSE survey, which celebrated its twentieth anniversary in January 2020, has been adopted across the US, where benchmarking between private and public HE colleges is central to their marketing and endowment efforts. Indeed, while many critique and examine the nature of SE, few have produced alternative ways to measure it. Kuh (2009) admits this, arguing that as the popularity of the NSSE grew, some institutions felt pressured to use it and, in this context, it is difficult to separate the instrument from the concept itself. Kahu (2013) concurs, cautioning that the survey risks becoming the definition of the SE concept.

Kuh (2008) continues to argue for the encouragement and measurement of those activities that the NSSE measures, and that which Kuh refers to as high impact practices (HIPs). These activities demand considerable time and effort, facilitate learning outside of the classroom and require meaningful interactions

between faculty and students. Furthermore, they encourage collaboration with a diverse range of people and facilitate the provision of frequent and comprehensive feedback (Kuh, 2008; NSSE 2007). However, as Kahn (2013) notes, while surveys allow institutions to measure the extent to which students engage in HIPs, it still leaves the SE concept weakly theorised, failing to explain how these practices work together to bring about learning gains. Kahn (2013) cites evidence from Carini et al.'s (2006) correlational analysis of NSSE scales and students' Grade Point Average (GPA). They (Carini et al., 2006) found very modest but statistically significant positive partial correlations for nine of the eleven NSSE scales.

Sayer (2010) reminds us that concepts can be operationalised using surveys that quantitatively correlate with other concepts, but that this does not necessarily explain the whole relationship, as we are often dealing with chaotic concepts. The fact that the nuances of what could be defined as a chaotic concept (Sayer, 2010) cannot be fully captured in a survey such as the NSSE, supports Zepke's (2015) thesis that SE assumes a 'one size fits all'. The acceptance of a causal relationship between SE and educational outcomes giving rise to the use of surveys to measure the former, produces, what Zepke describes as, a reductionist attitude to the measurement of how students engage. This in turn supports the use of generic pedagogical frameworks to produce survey data which act as 'fact tokens' that cloak important equity differences such as ethnicity, gender and class under the label "diversity". The underlying assumption lies in positivist thinking that observable phenomena can be measured quantitatively (Zepke, 2015). These, Klemenčič (2017) argues, only provide a 'snapshot' of the student experience, failing to do justice to its inherently dynamic and contextual

nature. This is problematic for Zepke (2015) because, when quoting hooks (2003), he argues that this glosses over how class, race, and gender inequities present difficulties when engaging minorities and the powerless (hooks 2003, p.703). That criticism is echoed in the text edited by Quaye et al. (2019) aimed at rethinking SE for diverse populations and in Bryson's (2014) observation that quantitative surveys lose sensitivity to contexts and give students no voice at all.

Kahu's (2013) more integrated approach to the study of SE highlights the importance of the broader socio-cultural, structural (family background and support, curriculum, university culture), and psychosocial influences (teaching approaches, student motivation) on engagement. This broader and more inclusive view recognises the complex nature of the concept and myriad of influences that impact students' engagement or disengagement. What Kahu identifies as the socio-cultural and structural influences on engagement aligns with what Devlin and McKay (2016) denote as sociocultural incongruence. This they identify as those differences in cultural and social capital identified by Bourdieu (1986) between students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and the tacit expectations inherent in university practices more familiar to those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Finn's (1993) study is worthy of mention here. In his continuum approach to SE he proposed categorising those predictors linked to student dropout from school as *status* variables or *alterable* variables. Status variables would encompass Kahu's socio-cultural and structural influences such as students' socio-economic status which cannot be changed or influenced by educators, while alterable variables would include the psychosocial influences such as teaching approaches and motivation. Finn's argument was that by separating out SE variables thus allowed educators to focus on those

aspects of the student experience that were amenable to change. This study follows Finn's advice by focusing in on those predictors or enablers of SE aspects of the teaching and learning environment that function as predictors or enablers of SE and crucially are amenable to change. In particular the equal attention Kahu gives to the influence of engagement as 'affect' demonstrated as enthusiasm, interest and belonging, alongside cognitive approaches such as deep or surface learning, and behaviours such as effort and time on task, resonate with my student-led definition of engagement. The activation of interest in the classroom has also been the subject of research, findings indicated that cultivation interest in the classroom may lead to the development of complex affective and emotional responses (Buckley et al., 2004). This echoes Cook-Sather's (2013b) assertion that engagement is an emotional as well as an intellectual investment. and Solomonides' (2013) emphasis on HE as 'becoming' and students' whole sense of being in relation to engagement.

Sinclair et al., (2003) observe that in order to bring about change distinction should be made between the *indicators* and the *facilitators* of SE. Indicators can be identified using measures such as attendance and academic performance and can form the starting point for planned interventions. Facilitators are those contextual factors that prompt or enable SE and it is these that this study seeks to reveal. Listening to how students speak about the best aspects of their Irish HE experience can provide insights on those contextual factors that impact on their whole sense of being and in doing so, responds to Kahu's (2013) call for in-depth studies of particular student populations. These, she argues, can reveal the unique nature of the student individual SE experience, experience that many argue can be understood through listening and responding to the student

voice. Defining student voice is problematic as it can often be defined in fixed and narrow terms as part of consumer panel or student satisfaction surveys such as the UK National Student Survey (NSS). Here, the university acts as a business and the student as the customer (Canning, 2017), with their feedback included in league tables to aid prospective students' decision-making (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005). However, the student open-ended questions in the ISSE suggest that *dialogue* and active listening by all parties is needed in order to be effective (Baroutsis et al, 2016, emphasis in original). These student comments represent the individual voices of a diverse student population and capture the wisdom of the many. As dialogue, the comments warrant a response. It was my belief in the importance of listening to these voices that prompted me to undertake the arduous, but rewarding, process of reading and analysing seven years of ISSE data.

### 3.9 Alternative conceptions of SE – engagement and alienation

Case (2008), quoting Entwistle (1997), argues that the approaches to learning perspective embedded in the NSSE and its global versions, have had enormous popularity with educational developers due, in no small part, to its simplistic outcome-based SE conception. This is due not only to the "recognisable reality" that they present regarding the student learning experience, but also because they involve relatively straightforward concepts (Entwistle, 1997, p.214). Skinner and Pitzer (2012) observe that SE can be conceptualised on a single continuum or as two continua, those of engagement and disengagement/disaffection.

Mann (2001) prompted more critical debate on the nebulous SE concept when she forced us to consider engagement to be the opposite of alienation, and

crucially the role of the institution in potentially alienating rather than engaging students. When discussing the learning perspectives embedded in the NSSE and its versions, she reminds us of our own role as teachers in potentially alienating students, alerting us to the complex relations of power in the teaching and learning process (Mann, 2001, p.8). Strayhorn (2012) sees alienation as resulting from an absence of a sense of belonging that ultimately impacts on academic performance and persistence.

Case (2008) argues that when compared with current dominant SE perspectives, the themes of alienation and engagement offer a broader and more contextualised view and serve as a productive alternative perspective for characterising the student HE experience. Drawing on the alienation literature, and referencing Mann's (2001) work, Case developed a framework to characterise students' experiences. Three factors underpin this framework: students' reasons for participating in HE; students' experiences of joining and fitting into the HE community; and students' attempts to persist and succeed in often disempowering assessment systems. Essentially, Case's framework focused on students entering, fitting in and staying the course in higher education. This reflects findings from the What Works project (Thomas, 2012) which revealed the overarching importance of students' sense of belonging in higher education, belonging that is enabled through SE. Mann (2005) posits that student feelings of alienation can be addressed by establishing learning communities in which a sense of belonging, shared purpose, relatedness, and support, are fostered. In her earlier work, Mann (2001) argued that alienation, when viewed as a failure of community, can be accounted for by reference to a student's own behaviour or that of their teachers, and essentially as a failure to take care of one

another. The emphasis on SE as community learning stands in stark contrast to the NSSE emphasis on student individual purposeful actions. Mann asserts that learning communities should function as ethical spaces in which teachers and learners develop a stance of openness to the other (Mann, 2001, p.122). In contrast, it is argued here that the NSSE frames behavioural engagement as individual actions and degrees of effort lead to success or failure. This is reflected in definitions of cognitive engagement as personal investment and self-regulation towards mastery (Fredricks et al., 2004).

What Mann is advocating is learning as collaborative and where communication between learners and teachers allows individual participants to have a voice but in the context of the learning community and its workings. Two things are noteworthy here: the low levels of SFI that students report in the ISSE; and the moral imperative to start listening and responding to what students have to say, so that their experience can be improved. In the act of adding comments to the ISSE, students make listening easy by signposting the best aspects of their experience and, crucially, those aspects that warrant attention. Thomas (2012) reminds us that HE has the potential to enable a rich and engaged experience for students that leads to personal transformation, reflexivity and changed worldviews. However, it can as easily alienate, waste opportunity, limit potential and in doing so undermine and diminish the individual student, and the student's transformed view of the world. Thomas's work serves to remind us that HE is neither neutral nor natural. Rather, it is implicated in the relations between power and society and, crucially, it affects people's lives. That HE contexts are governed by relations of power is not considered in the NSSE as the questions infer that students have considerable autonomy in managing their learning, an assumption

that this study disputes. To more fully understand how relations of power impact on SE, listening to and acting upon students' feedback comments seems like a simple and moral thing to do.

### 3.10 Student engagement and social integration – the role of interaction

Engagement develops relationships with others, promotes connectedness and "enables belonging through supportive peer relations; meaningful interaction with staff; developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners and, a HE experience relevant to students' interests and future goals" (Thomas, 2012, p.4). It is clear then that to fully understand what engages students in HE, equal emphasis needs to be placed on the student's social integration in the academic world (Wilcox et al., 2019). Exploring students' social integration will by necessity consider the role that SFI plays in students' integration and sense of belonging. The preoccupation with retention in HE policy has prompted a focus on approaches to learning and teaching methods such as interaction and collaboration which, Wilcox et al. (2019) argue, has diverted attention away from the social aspects of student integration into university life. This is reflected in the paucity of literature on the topic (Haselgrove, 1994 cited in Wilcox et al., 2019). For teachers and researchers, SE's appeal is linked to the many cognitive, social, and emotional benefits that accrue when students actively engage with their studies (Harper & Quaye, 2009). Furthermore, the increasing emphasis on student-centred teaching prompts academics to explore what engages or alienates students in classrooms and on campus (Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2012; Mann, 2010).

Building on Tinto's (1987) work on belonging and retention, Baumeister and Leary (1995) presented their 'belongingness hypothesis', arguing that human

beings have a pervasive need to form and maintain a number of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships. SFI is instrumental in building significant relationships (Endo & Harpel,1982; 2009) and is associated with personal, social, and intellectual outcomes (Kuh & Hu, 2001). Strauss and Volkwein (2004) found that higher satisfaction with faculty interaction was associated with greater commitment to the institution. Pascarella and Terenzini (1980), in their longitudinal study, found that the quantity and quality of contacts with faculty were linked to gains in intellectual development, as well as to first-year student persistence. Yet infrequent SFI is not a new problem as 50 years ago Snow (1973) found that almost a third of students reported no ‘‘significant’’ contact with faculty members in their respective majors. Kane et al. (2014) in their research on student sense of belonging across three London universities estimated that 10–15% of first-year students failed to develop any sense of belonging when engaging with university life and that these students were most at risk of dropout. Given the reference in the introduction to the worryingly low levels of SFI reported in the ISSE, where, reflecting Kane et al.'s findings, first years had the lowest levels of interaction, in analysing the student comments, I sought to explore how students interact with faculty and elucidate any barriers to the development of teacher-student relationships.

### 3.11 Student engagement and student voice

The increased risk of dropout in the first year of college and the low levels of SFI in the ISSE, reflects Tinto's (1997) work. His research on retention was premised on students' successful academic and social integration into college and was contingent upon favourable daily interactions with faculty. Bovill concurs, emphasising the positive benefits that staff-student relationships developed

through frequent interaction inside and outside the classroom bring to students (Bovill, 2020). These include enhanced cognitive development, aspirations, persistence, and career preparation (Richardson & Radloff, 2014).

However, in a now massified HE context, staff are challenged to support students so that they feel they belong and are valued (Bovill, 2020). The classroom, where staff and students meet, is a key site of possibility for inclusivity and collegiality, yet the opportunities that this context offers for relational pedagogy and co-creation of curricula are often under-used (Bovill, 2020, p.2). The ISSE comments provide examples of how relationships are built in Irish HE classrooms and conversely how they are stymied as illustrated in Table 4.

**Table 4** – Relational pedagogy comments in the ISSE (2019)

| What is Best comments (2019) | What Could Improve comments (2019) |
| --- | --- |
| Classwork, personal experiences, motivation 'can do spirit', engage in genuine student relationships | Be patient, provide autonomy support, establish positive lecturer-student relationships |
| xxx… has a greater relationship between lecturers and students, even though we are only first years, lecturers regularly stay behind and help when asked | Build stronger relationships between lecturer/academic staff and students<br><br>Establish more positive student-teacher relationships |
| Develops a friendly trusting relationship and doesn't make asking for help awkward<br><br>Very personal relationship with lecturers makes us feel valued | Ensuring lectures aquire (sic) participation among all students in all lectures, instead of a one-sided relationship between the students and lecturer |

Understanding the benefits that accrue from successful faculty-student relationships underpin calls for a more relational pedagogy (Fielding, 1999). Listening to the student voice to inform a more critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1983) can serve to challenge existing approaches to teaching (Bovill, 2020). Yet often efforts to listen to the student voice represent that voice in fixed and

uncomplicated terms that undermine the true agency and diversity of students and their experiences (Rubin & Silva, 2003). If, in the spirit of student centeredness, students are to be afforded opportunities to influence decisions about how they learn in HE, then they must be given a voice, and the opportunity to contribute to policy discussions and debates. Listening to this voice is important as "it is central both to a wider and deeper commitment to the development of agency in a democratic society and to our sense of human solidarity" (Fielding, 2001, p.104).

Defining student voice is problematic as it can present itself in many forms and in conflicting narratives (Czerniawski 2012). It often takes the form of consumer panels, an approach that resonates with the idea of the university as a business and the student as a customer (Canning, 2017, p.519). However, voice suggests *dialogue,* and active listening by all parties in order to be effective (Baroutsis et al., 2016, emphasis in original). Baroutsis et al.'s (2016) approach to student voice stands in direct contrast to the consumer panel approach and reflects Lundy's (2007) research in school settings. She, (Lundy), constructed a four-dimensional framework for student voice based on *space*, that is the opportunity to have a say; *voice*, to express their view often supported by adults; an *audience*, having their views listened to; and *influence*, having their ideas acted upon (emphasis added). This framework is reflective of an agentic approach to SE advocated by Klemenčič (2015), an approach that draws on social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) and premised on student agency as shaped by institutional structures. An alternative definition offered by Templeton et al (2018) draws on the work of several authors (Seale, 2009; Canning, 2017) and comprises two distinct elements. Firstly, student voice implies agency to

participate in institutional decision making and secondly, institutions have a responsibility to listen to student voices, hearing what is being said in considered ways, incorporating student voices into decisions. Canning (2017), acknowledging Seale's (2009) assertion that conceptions of student voice in HE are underdeveloped, highlights the extent to which the SE concept obscures our understanding of voice. Canning argues that student voice could be a component of SE, or that SE is a part of student voice or perhaps that "student engagement is essentially a synonym for student voice". (Canning, 2017, p.520). Taken literally, student voice can be interpreted as the actual sound of students' voices as they inform conversations about educational practice, giving rise to 'you said, we did' responses. In contrast, Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) present voice as the antithesis of what is a consumerist view of students arguing that voice approaches are profoundly student-centred, and nested in the thoughts, feelings, visions and actions of the students themselves (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p.29). This blurring of the boundaries melds together SE research influenced by the North American literature and linked to the NSSE (Trowler, 2010) and movements such as Students as Producers(Neary & Winn, 2009 cited in Canning (2017) or students as partners (SaP) (HEA, 2014 cited in Canning, 2017).

Student voice can serve as a metaphor for students' power and participation (Cook-Sather, 2006). Part of what makes metaphors powerful is the way they operate both abstractly and actually (Matthews et al., 2018). Several authors have documented how student voice has enabled the transformation of curriculum and perspectives (Brooman et al., 2015; Cook-Sather 2013a; Bovill & Bulley, 2011). Others caution that student voice is often codified in ways that restrict the sharing of power (Canning, 2017; Frison & Melacarne, 2017),

asserting that voice is in fact power and participation (Cook-Sather, 2006; Matthews et al, 2018). Indeed, the concepts of student voice and SaP have been conflated in the literature. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland (Collins et al, 2016) advocates for a model of student voice where students are directly involved as change agents and partners in their institutions. However, Trowler (2013) reminds us that partnership implies mutual respect between parties. If the ISSE comprises an integral part of student voice efforts in Irish HE, then it seems counterintuitive, if not immoral, not to give equal importance to the open-ended comments that students offer and analyse them as a corpus nationally and publish the results. Fielding argues that students will soon tire of invitations to express views on aspects of their learning, framed in language that they find restrictive, alienating or patronising. Crucially, he argues, this approach seldom results in actions of dialogue that affects students' lives (Fielding, 2004, p.307).

Later in the literature review I raise the question of who gets to see the feedback from the ISSE and who has the authority and responsibility to respond. Scholars such as Brennan (1997) argue that policies would have a better chance of being fully implemented if more attention was paid to the different levels at which the policy was directed. I argue throughout this thesis that SE is inextricably linked to the teaching and learning context in which it takes place, so the appropriate target for the ISSE open-ended feedback should be the academic departments and the academics themselves. However, feedback from the ISSE survey is managed through institutional quality departments usually at the level of Registrar. Therefore, it is often the case that the dissemination of this feedback is restricted, its content becoming blurred as it filters down through the hierarchies

to the frontline teachers (Niklasson, 1996). This has led scholars to posit that policy development and implementation might be improved if more attention was paid to the different levels at which the policy is directed (Brennan, 1997). Facilitating dialogue between students and the teachers who can respond can lead to the transformation (Fielding, 1999) that is only possible when students and teachers are involved in opportunities for dialogic encounter. Opportunities for dialogic encounter underpin student voice as an ethical and moral practice which affords students the right to democratic participation in their education (Taylor & Robinson, 2009). Taylor and Robinson's (2009) research addresses the challenge that exists between the normative ideal of SE and the realities of practice: that is, the constraints and limitations of the current HE context. Seale's (2009) analysis of student voice in HE questions the extent that attempts to listen to and include the student voice in HE policy and practice lead to empowerment, participation and transformation. This, she argues, has led to a lack of detailed description or discussion around how these ideals are enacted in the practice of student voice work.

### 3.11.1 Student voice – hierarchy and power

Any discussion on student voice and students' participation in shaping their engagement must address the thorny issue of power in HE. Academic institutions are constructed as hierarchies and the opportunities that students are afforded to shape their engagement is determined by the roles they are given. Phillip Carey (2018) captures the hierarchical nature of SE when drawing on the students as change agents research conducted by Kay et al., (2010) at the University of Exeter. Their research acknowledged the value of listening to the student voice using instruments such as the NSS and using this feedback as a

key institutional driver. However, it argued that such approaches, when governed and operated by the institution, render the student voice passive and disempowered. In particular, it notes that while students are included on institutional committees, they are often expected to disappear when the committee gets down to reserved business. This passive approach to student voice has consolidated the 'student as a consumer' approach with its attendant difficulties. Citing Schwartzman (1995), they argue that this consigns students to the role of a customer, and educators to that of panderers concerned more with customer satisfaction than intellectual challenge (Kay et al., 2010, p.1). Kay and her colleagues constructed a framework around four distinct and specific roles that students perform in HE: students as evaluators; students as participants; students as partners/co-creators of, and experts in, learning; and students as change agents. The authors were careful to point out that the framework captures four different but equally valid approaches which allow students to engage and be engaged with their learning. These approaches are overlapping rather than discrete and serve to show the various ways that students are encouraged to shape their university experiences. The extent to which these roles and approaches afford students opportunities to act with agency to shape their engagement, is dependent on the ways in which the power to act is shared between the institution and the student. The bulk of the SE literature, most of which originates in North America, identifies students' individual and purposeful actions, as measured in the NSSE and the ISSE as the foundations of SE. Indeed, while the absence of student purposeful actions is often interpreted as laziness or passivity (Seale, 2015 cited in Carey, 2018), this may be a faulty assumption. Students' lack of engagement may in fact signal a different, but

legitimate form of engagement, that of resistance (Trowler, 2010).

Bearing Trowler's (2010) observation in mind, Carey (2018) reminds us that the capacity to engage is often not within the student's realm of influence. He highlights how the *ability to act* is often outside students' control, and determined by institutional needs: in other words, student actions are governed by what the institution *allows* them to do (emphasis added). Presenting institutional purposeful actions as the natural complement to those of students, Carey presents the freedoms students are afforded to act in the form of a nested hierarchy. That hierarchy categorises institutional attitudes to including students as change agents along four levels: the *reactive* institution; the *responsive* institution; the *collaborative* institution and the *progressive* institution (emphasis in original).

At the first level, the reactive institution relies on existing metrics and surveys to capture student reported behaviours and satisfaction, which they use to inform institutional policies. Engagement is established through compliance, where student input is limited to their responses to questions about their experiences. At the next level, the *responsive* institution recognises students' expertise on the learning experience and invites them to partake in decision-making. However, the students' influence is restricted, their contribution viewed as that of a consultant, albeit one with whom dialogue is facilitated. Thirdly, the *collaborative* institution views students as active agents in shaping their experiences. This approach is characterised by efforts to achieve mutual understanding, where evidence-based actions can inform change. Finally, the *progressive* institution respects the primacy of students in decision making and is underpinned by mechanisms that allow students to initiate, monitor and

substantiate actions (Carey, 2018, p.13).

Given these two perspectives (Kay et al., 2010; Carey, 2018) on the ways that student participation in decision making is facilitated, it is instructive perhaps to review Kay et al.'s framework alongside Carey's nested hierarchy of institutional engagement approaches, as illustrated in Table 5. It allows us to consider where to position the ISSE approach to engaging students in Irish HE.

**Table 5** – Students as Change Agents Framework. Based on Kay, Dunne and Hutchinson (2010) and Carey (2018)

| Student roles | Instruments and Approaches | Sharing of power | Impetus for action |
|---|---|---|---|
| Students as evaluators | Surveys; focus groups; Complaint procedures; teaching evaluations | Institutional/ Government/Policy maker led approach | Reactive Institution: Students as a data source |
| Students as participants | Student representatives on committees/program boards | Joint Institution led/ student led approach | Responsive Institution: Students as participants |
| Students as partners, co-creators and experts | Students given authority and responsibilities for curriculum design | Equal partnership led approach | Collaborative Institution: Students as partners |
| Students as change agents | Students empowered to design and effect changes that shape their learning | Students as leaders approach | Progressive Institution: Students as change agents |

### 3.11.2 The ISSE – students as evaluators or participants?

When we review the roles students are offered alongside institutional motivations, it would appear that the feedback students offer in the ISSE positions students as evaluators, and it falls to the individual institutions to respond to their concerns. However, if as this study advocates, the student comments are treated

as equal to the quantitative responses in how they are analysed then this can move the students' role from simple evaluators to that of participants. To date, unlike the quantitative responses, no national analysis of student comments is conducted, so no national student authored report of what engages them is produced and published.

Treating the responses to the open-ended questions as equal to the quantitative indices is crucial, as the open-ended questions allow students to raise the issues that most impact on their engagement. The fixed response questions on the other hand are based on what others, albeit informed by the literature, consider to be important for SE. While Table 5 above identifies the student in a participant role and as normally enacted through students' participation in institutional committees, it could be argued that this only enables a 'chosen few' to participate as representatives of the wider population. These traditional mechanisms for involving students in university governance have been challenged and expanded with a particular focus on student equity and the increasing diversity of the student body (Naylor & Mifsud, 2019). Research by Carey (2013) with student representatives reported, that while students acknowledged that they were increasingly being listened to, this needed to happen as part of a dialogue where both sides were empowered to debate, challenge, and question. What was concerning in his study findings was that student representative committees could be intimidating places to raise their concerns, often generating feelings of vulnerability when students share these spaces with the tutors who assess their work. Furthermore, students observed that committees can often block debate, commenting that any discussion of teaching performance was often prohibited in these fora. This provides further

justification for attending and responding to the comments that are offered in an online environment where anonymity is assured and where fear of retribution is eliminated. This could move the role of students in the ISSE from simple evaluators to partners, co-creators and experts of learning.

### 3.12 Students as partners (SaP)

SaP is emerging as a participative approach to transforming institutional cultures in an increasingly economically driven HE context (Gravett et al, 2019). Healey et al. (2014) argue that partnership offers the potential for a more authentic engagement with the nature of learning itself, that can lead to genuinely transformative experiences. Partnership is an inherently dialogic process and advocates of SaP are critical of engagement approaches that are based on listening to the student voice in a “you said, we did” mode implying an inherent power imbalance in the relationship. The SaP movement in HE has its roots in the more developed ‘student voice’ movement in the school sector, a body of literature that is rooted in social justice and democratic ideologies (Cook-Sather, 2018). The term itself emerged as a means of recognising students as colleagues, a constituency in HE traditionally considered the recipient, not the producer, of knowledge (Neary, 2010). SaP recognises the rights of students to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to investigations, analysis, and decisions on curricular and pedagogical matters (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014).

A systematic review of the literature on SaP (Mercer-Mapstone, 2017) identified a broad range of positive outcomes for students, including increased engagement and motivation, and perceptions of self-efficacy. Furthermore, research confirms that SaP approaches benefit students and teachers alike, with

teachers reporting developing new or better curricula, transformed beliefs about teaching and learning impacting on their practice and motivation, and enjoyment of teaching (Bovill, 2020).

Current conceptions of SaP are grounded in an ethic of reciprocity that is built on respect and shared responsibility (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017). Reciprocity in partnership is premised on dialogue, negotiation, and the exchange of ideas between partners (Mercer-Capstone et al., 2017). That the relationships are reciprocal determines the authenticity and success of any SaP approach ensuring all participants can contribute to curricular or pedagogical decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis. (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p.6).

It can be argued that fully equal partnerships are difficult to achieve in HE, given the role that the institute and its faculty have in the assessment and accreditation of students. However, rather than seeking unrealistic equal partnerships between staff and students, in their place can come equitable partnerships that harness and build on the strengths of all stakeholders (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014). Bryson concurs asserting that “SaP should enable all equal opportunity to participate and all voices, opinions and contributions listened to and acknowledged with mutual respect and appreciation” (Bryson, 2017, p.5). This SaP commitment to joint endeavour and power sharing, extends into the realms of emotions in human relationships which are central to the SaP concept yet often not discussed in the context of learning in HE. Felten argues that it is the emotional dimensions of partnerships that shine a light on the dynamics of the process and the powerful outcomes of partnership work (Felten, 2017).

### 3.13 Student voice and pedagogical partnerships

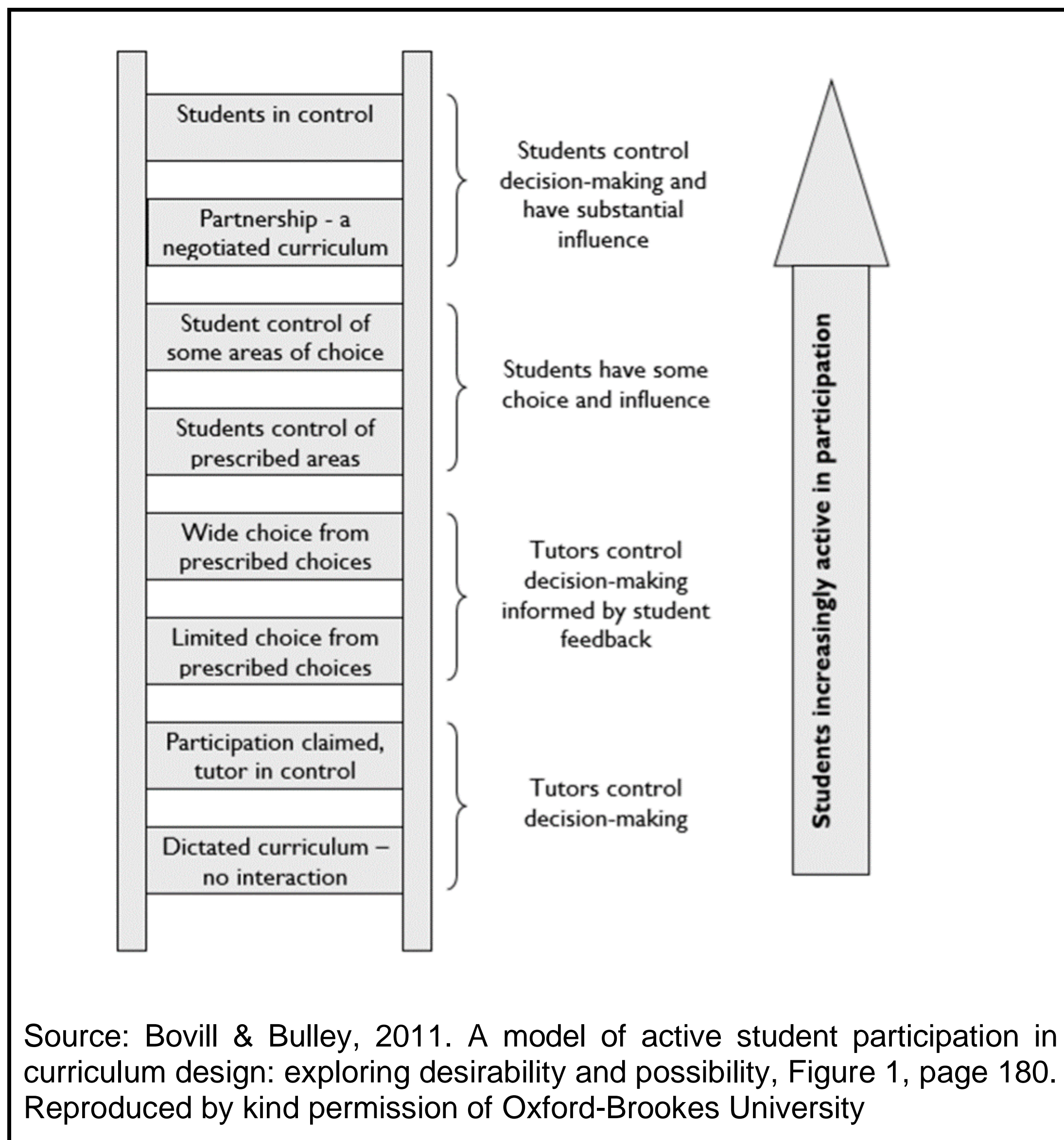
The approach of involving students is variously referred to as SaP, student faculty partnerships or staff-student partnerships, but some have argued that they all fall under the umbrella of pedagogical partnerships (Felten et al., 2019). This framing can be justified by the evidence that students as partners in HE challenges traditional assumptions about the identities of, and relationships between, learners and teachers. Explicitly naming students serves "to intentionally and clearly assert the role students can assume alongside others with educational expertise" (Matthews, 2017, p.1). Discourses around SaP as pedagogical partnerships present a counter narrative to the neoliberal stance in HE which views students as consumers, creating a space for relational narratives about learning and teaching in HE (Matthews et al., 2018). Echoing Healey et al (2014), the role of relationships between teachers and students that are underpinned by shared principles and values is critical (Matthews et al, 2018). Values of trust, courage, plurality, responsibility, authenticity, reciprocity, and empowerment, amongst other things, should guide partnership (Healey et al., 2014).

When student voice is situated within the framework of SaP, Seale (2009) questions how student voice empowers students to both participate and transform. Power, as Foucault (1982) reminds us, is ubiquitous and unfolds in social systems where individuals possess certain habits and capital, resources that either advantage or disadvantage them in social interactions (Bourdieu, 2003;1988). SaP approaches inevitably lead to questions of where power is located and how or if it is distributed.

> Power whether discussed or left unspoken is always a factor in SaP interactions. The intention of SaP is not to tip the scales in favour of one party over another or eliminate power altogether (Matthews, 2017, p.3).

The extent to which power is distributed or shared in pedagogical partnerships is a thorny one. There are, as Bovill and Bulley (2011) point out, complex and overlapping challenges to engaging in pedagogical partnerships: resistance to co-creation of learning and teaching; navigating institutional structures, practices and norms; and establishing an inclusive approach (Bovill & Bulley,2011). Echoing calls for students to become co-creators, co-producers and co-designers of their own learning in HE, ostensibly the philosophy behind all SaP movements, the authors sought to show how the aim of students as true collaborative partners could be realised. Adopting yet another acronym, they coined the term Active Student Participation (ASP) and drew upon Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Participation to illustrate the degree of influence and control that students can exert over the design of their curricula. Figure 3 illustrates this.

**Figure 3** – Ladder of student participation in curriculum design – Bovill and Bulley's adapted ladder of participation




Source: Bovill & Bulley, 2011. A model of active student participation in curriculum design: exploring desirability and possibility, Figure 1, page 180. Reproduced by kind permission of Oxford-Brookes University

The first rung of the ladder, the dictated curriculum where teachers control decisions can be equated to Freire's (1996) banking concept of education, and this, while disappointing, is arguably less worrying, than the second rung on the ladder. On the second rung, participation is claimed but the tutor remains in control, as students are led to believe that they are participating via feedback on the process, but where there is no evidence that their feedback has been taken on board or changes happen. I was particularly struck by Bovill and Bulley's

(2011) paper when researching the literature. I could not help but consider where the ISSE as a participation and feedback mechanism would fit on the ladder of participation. Although the survey is designed to measure engagement in high impact practices, the quantitative design of the majority of the questions would potentially position it on the lowest rung – that of dictated curriculum or in this case dictated agenda with no interaction. However, the inclusion of the open-ended questions offers students the potential to participate in shaping their learning but that participation is dependent on how the responses to the open-ended questions are used.

Earlier the issue of who gets to see the responses and who is in a position to respond was raised. Students, while happy to give feedback, are powerless to effect any action that might respond to comments and concerns. Anecdotally, and in the comments, students remark that while they are happy to give feedback either through the ISSE or module evaluations, disappointingly it appears that often nothing ever changes. This essentially would position student participation on the second rung of the ladder, a rung that is a cause for concern, where the illusion of participation is created, but where feedback is not acted upon. If this is in fact the case, it would render the survey as an exercise in consultation with no guarantee of participation. In the Bovill and Bulley (2011) model, the second rung is represented as a ‘participation claimed, tutor in control’ approach. Bovill and Bulley (2011) point to Arnstein’s (1969) warning that participation in disingenuous ways can be damaging, leading to participant alienation and general mistrust of the process. This is also echoed in Fielding’s (2004) comment that students soon tire of invitations to contribute where there is little evidence that their feedback is acted upon.

Rungs three and four of the ladder encompass varying degrees of choice and freedom that teachers bestow on students allowing them to select from either a limited or wide number of prescribed choices. At this level of participation students are indeed offered greater opportunities to provide input on their ideas, but only from choices prescribed by the experts in learning, the teachers alone. The fifth rung of the ladder addresses the issue of who are the experts in learning by affording students the freedom to influence specific aspects of the curriculum. Examples of what this might look like are the design of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) for a module of learning, or designing, conducting or analysing module evaluations. The sixth rung of Bovill and Bulley's (2011) adapted ladder offers greater choice again with students being allowed to choose the areas of the curriculum they would like to design and develop. Student participation can be further amplified and strengthened on the seventh rung, with the authors using Fraser and Bosanquet's (2006, p.272) definition of curriculum as "a dynamic, emergent and collaborative process of learning for both student and teacher" (cited in Bovill & Bulley, 2011, p.6). This model of partnership, that of a negotiated curriculum, represents tutors and students as co-constructors of knowledge (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006, p.272). Table 6 below details the rungs and level of influence and collaboration that students are afforded in shaping the design of their learning.

**Table 6** – Ladder of participation in curriculum design (Bovill & Bulley, 2011)

| Rung and label | Examples |
|---|---|
| 8) Students in control | - student designed learning outcomes & projects. - student led journal clubs, student led journals |
| 7) Partnership – a negotiated curriculum | - student experience and work used as basis for curriculum<br>- students actively and meaningfully negotiating curriculum with tutor |
| 6) Student control of some areas of choice | - students choose areas of curriculum they want to design – e.g., students design a project to achieve set learning outcomes |
| 5) Student control of prescribed areas | - students offered control of specific tutor-selected areas of the curriculum e.g., students design their own assessment or VLE |
| 4) Wide choice from prescribed choices | - students choose their assessment type from a range of choices (assessment regulations still dictated |
| 3) Limited choice from prescribed choices | - students offered choice over small elements of curriculum e.g., choice of two readings for next class |
| 2) Participation claimed but tutor in control | - student feedback forms gathered to inform curricula design but not used |
| 1) Dictated curriculum – no interaction | - students turn up for class (or not) |
| Source Bovill & Bulley, 2011, p. 182 Reproduced by kind permission of Oxford Brookes University | |

It is important to note that Bovill and Bulley stress that others may disagree with where they have placed examples on their ladder or may have alternatives but this model is, they emphasise, purely offered as a starting point for debate that might lead to a deeper understanding of the possibilities for active student participation.

### 3.14 SaP and neoliberalism

Student faculty partnerships provide opportunities to contest the neoliberal discourses that underpin teaching and learning practices in present day HE. Neoliberalism is based on the premise that individuals are essentially motivated

by self-interest, a self-interest that benefits the interests of the free market (Zepke, 2015b; Connell,2013). Neoliberalism, with its emphasis on education as a commodity sold in the market and managed as a business, positions HE as a producer of skilled labour for the marketplace (Wijaya Mulya, 2019). Assessment and grading in these systems place students in hierarchies through which they see themselves in competition with others. This leads to learning becoming self-interested, fixated on grades and competition for lucrative careers (Wijaya Mulya, 2019). The SaP approach presents a counter narrative to this in which learning is neither pre-determined nor externally imposed, but co-created, reflective and reciprocal (Healy et al., 2014 cited in Wijaya Mulya, 2019). This leads to teaching that is more democratic and rooted in students social and cultural contexts (Wijaya Mulya, 2019, p.88).

### 3.15 SE – agency and SaP

Co-creation of curricula facilitated by SaP approaches (Bovill, 2011; 2019) build student agentic engagement. Student agency is defined as the quality of students' self-reflective and intentional action and interaction with their environment (Klemenčič et al., 2017, p.11). Archers' (2003) work on the relationship between structure and agency shows us that structural and cultural properties possess generative powers of constraint that objectively shape the situations in which agents act. According to Giddens (1991), structure and agency are entwined, simultaneously either enabling or constraining agency.

Student agency is shaped by the structure of institutions (Klemenčič et al., 2017) and the structures that impact on students' ability to exercise agency are most evident in the teaching and learning spaces. Teachers consciously or unconsciously exercise control in the classroom, thereby influencing the students'

sense of agency and willingness to engage (Wimpenny & Savin-Baden, 2012). However, despite a prolific body of research in HE, there has been very little focus on issues of structure and agency in 'close up' research on teaching, learning and assessment (Ashwin, 2006). While it is acknowledged that teaching and learning approaches are instrumental in student success in HE, it is assessment regimes, in particular, that have subtle ways of socialising people, offering or withholding forms of cultural and social capital (Ecclestone, 2004). The rules of the game are embedded within an ideology that governs behaviour but these rules are often covert, and part of the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968).

### 3.16 The hidden curriculum in education

Students in embarking on their studies encounter messages embedded in the visible and hidden curricula about their place and identity as learners (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015, p.349). The curriculum for some, rather than being an engaging experience, may prove to be both painful and alienating under what Clegg (2011) refers to as the symbolic violence of the hidden curriculum (Clegg, 2011, cited in Ashwin & McVitty, 2015, p.349).

In his research in school settings, Jackson observed that there were social and behavioural expectations, values and dispositions that brought rewards in school. These expectations emphasised specific skills such as waiting, turn taking, effort, exercising restraint, completing work, cooperating, being neat and punctual and overall showing courtesy and respect to teachers and peers (Jackson, 1968). He coined the term 'The Hidden Curriculum' for this set of procedures or conditions for successful engagement in school, drawing heavily on the work of Durkheim and Parsons (1956) who observed that schools had a specific societal role in the socialisation of students that other institutions are

unable to perform. Jackson notes that society survives by virtue of homogeneity amongst its members and education systems perpetuate and reinforces that homogeneity (Jackson,1968). Jackson's work is often juxtaposed with the work of Durkheim and Parsons (1956) and others, their collective work usually labelled as Marxist perspectives (Margolis et al., 2001, p.6). The seminal work of economists, Bowles and Gintis (1976), examined what they called the 'correspondence thesis', that is the relationship between the norms of schooling and maintaining capitalist systems. Their position was that the formal and hidden curriculum reproduces the social relations necessary to maintain hierarchical divisions of labour, authority, and compliance. Crucially, they added, this prepares students for future stratified work roles – the hidden curriculum is the means by which behaviours and attitudes are inculcated through the natural and everyday features of school life (Margolis et al., 2001). Portelli and McMahon (2004) argue that traditional approaches to SE (Newman et al.,1992) cement this phenomenon. SE, when conceived of as academic achievement, supports the notion of students possessing behavioural traits and/or observable psychological dispositions, leading to a linear or simple cause and effect characterisation of the engagement concept. Full responsibility for determining the curriculum is held by the teacher, and student involvement is neither encouraged nor considered (McMahon & Portelli, 2004, p.62). This conception of engagement could be argued to "lead to the exclusion of certain students from being engaged unless they happen to adhere to the ideological traits that this conception promotes as being ''natural or acceptable to all" (McMahon & Portelli, 2004, p.64). In contrast, a conception of SE also exists based on critical-democratic practice which entails the enactment of a curriculum of life. SE in a critical democratic sense is

qualitatively different from approaches that focus on engagement as a matter of behaviours, strategies or techniques. Rather, it is realised through relationships and dialectical processes between teachers and students, generated through interactions in a shared space where democratic reconstruction is facilitated. This necessitates empowering students using engaged pedagogies where "teachers are committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being'' (hooks, 1994, p.15, in Portelli & McMahon, 2004, p.71).

## 3.17 Critical democratic practice and structuralist cultural reproduction theory

Any discussion of critical pedagogy and critical democratic practice in schooling cannot ignore social and cultural reproduction theories. Such theories have remained – despite appearances – a central assumption of critical pedagogy and critical sociologies of schooling. Brooker (2000), when referring to the work of Bernstein (1970), discusses the controlling, stratifying and excluding mechanisms that pervade classroom contexts. Success in schooling may depend more on the extent to which students' backgrounds have acculturated them to the norms of schooling and the behaviours of success. Cultural reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1998) suggests that although students bring diverse knowledge, skills and experiences to the classroom, these may not necessarily align with those that schooling requires and rewards (Gee 1996).

Students vary in their exposure to cultural capital depending on their habitus, and, Bourdieu  argued, the children of middle-class families are often advantaged as schools value the social, economic and cultural capital they bring with them. Similarly, when it comes to HE, "the acorn falls close to the oak" (Grayson, 2010, p.605) as research confirms that 'first generation' students, were

the least likely to have had experiences consistent with success in the education system.

A later band of resistance theorists presented counter arguments to the functionalist reading of the education system presented by the correspondence thesis theorists. As Bourdieu (1998) notes, “There is no genuine democracy without genuine critical opposing powers” (Bourdieu, 1998, p.8). These critical opposing powers came in the work of Freire (1996), Giroux (1983), and hooks (1989), whose counter narratives focused on literacy, critical consciousness, ‘a pedagogy of hope’ and the role of agency and resistance. This agency and resistance is enabled through the use of radical pedagogies. “Rather than viewing teaching as a technical practice involving students processing received knowledge, a radical pedagogy is a moral and political practice where learning transforms knowledge in the struggles for individual rights and social justice (Giroux, 2003, p.11).

However, rather than universities functioning as centres of critical consciousness, and employing radical pedagogies, MacFarlane (2017) argues that the focus is on the use of teaching and learning and assessment interventions that are designed to increase SE. The emphasis and justification for such interventions was to improve the learning experience and deliver learning gains, those gains nested in skills and knowledge most relevant to employers. Furthermore, SE policies seek to shape student dispositions and attitudes. MacFarlane argues that today’s university students are subjected to regimes that demand participative, behavioural, and emotional expectations that inhibit their development and academic freedom. This system, which MacFarlane calls ‘student performativity’, treats students as children rather than adults restricting

their capacity to learn independently. The focus on performativity removes the 'humanness' from HE, inevitably leading to student alienation (Bovill, 2017, p.14, emphasis in original). This culture of performativity constitutes a hidden curriculum which the student is forced to navigate but that undermines their freedom to learn. MacFarlane (2017, p1), citing Nixon (2008), posits that what is needed is a new academic professionalism based on freedom for others where academics ensure students can speak their own minds and learn in accordance with their own interests.

The issue of presenteeism and performative behaviours that MacFarlane raises are topics that I have reflected on when considering what exactly the ISSE is for and crucially whose interests are being served through its use. In a previous unpublished paper (Short, 2017), I questioned the assumption in the ISSE of the engaged student attending campus frequently and interacting with staff and peers face to face. In its place I offered an alternative *neo-engaged* student. Based on my experience of working with students in a predominantly commuter college, I identified these students as engaged, but not as we know it. These students were often, what I refer to as, earner-learners, working full-time while attending college as only by working full-time was attending HE possible. Their success depended on their ability to leverage the affordances of technology to access resources and peer support online in order to achieve their HE aims. In doing so, the neo-engaged student circumvents the regimes of surveillance that enforce compliance with the attendance behaviours that the survey implies and the institution demands. For these students, many of the survey questions that assume frequent campus attendance may not resonate and their responses may relegate them to the level of the unengaged.

### 3.18 The engaged student and freedom to learn

While MacFarlane (2017) argues for a more generous and inclusive approach to academic freedom for students, similar sentiments have been echoed by students themselves. In a recent publication Madeline Pownall (2020), explores how the future of SE must acknowledge the multifaceted nature of success in HE, whilst remaining sensitive to the complexities of the student experience. She poses a very pertinent question, that of who ultimately gets to decide what constitutes success in HE? She argues, based on her own experience of HE as an earner-learner (Short, 2017) balancing work and study, that we need more nuanced methods of understanding student success that are not based on academic attainment alone, but methods that capture the inherently multi-faceted and deeply subjective nature of the student experience. Using case study examples, Pownall illustrates how students who are intrinsically motivated to succeed, often, for a variety of reasons, do not engage in extra-curricular activities and often have below par grades and attendance. These students, Pownall argues, would according to traditional metrics, not be considered 'engaged'. For Pownall, "The process of defining success is entrenched within rigid and hierarchical power dynamics" (Pownall, 2020, p.251). She argues that critically exploring *who* (emphasis in text) defines success is as insightful, if not more so than, looking at *how* it is defined. This, she argues, is a process that demands engagement with the student voice. Echoing the comments of Trowler (2010) and others cited in this literature review, Pownall bemoans the absence of the crucial missing link in understanding SE and success, that of student voice in the conversations surrounding SE and pedagogic practice. Without a sense of student voice, she argues, success in the context of teaching and learning

becomes unrepresentative and fails to capture the true student experience of HE study (Pownall, 2020, p.251). Without sufficient engagement with a clear and critical student voice, the concept of success risks becoming paternalistic. Rather, she argues, any reframing of SE and success should be done *with* rather than *to* students, using SaP models (emphasis added). Any reframing of SE and success needs to focus on the individual contexts of student HE experiences, producing more nuanced conceptions that are not based on understanding success in terms of academics alone. Capturing student subjective experiences of how they experience Irish HE allows us, as Pownall recommends, to reframe SE *with* students and challenges notions of who is best placed to define it.

### 3.19 Chapter summary

This chapter has explored the literature on SE and how it is conceived. Driven by the challenges associated with widening participation strategies and the challenge of meeting the needs of a diverse student cohort, instruments like the NSSE have influenced how the phenomenon is conceived and measured. And yet, it remains an under-theorised concept that can be viewed through two competing positions – the student as a consumer of an education service or the student as a partner in their process of ongoing transformation.

While the NSSE has attracted much criticism, it remains a popular and widely used instrument that is often used as a proxy for HE quality. NSSEs emphasis on outcomes that are contingent on student individual actions ignores the relations of power inherent in hierarchical systems. It ignores that SE can be considered in terms of its opposite condition, that of alienation. Research highlights the potential of institutions and their relations of power to alienate the very students that widening participation strategies aim to nurture. Power, we are

reminded, is ubiquitous and unfolds in social systems where individuals possess certain habits and capital. Those habits and the lack of cultural capital on the part of some students can serve to alienate rather than engage students entering the unfamiliar surroundings of the academy. Recognising the importance of relationships in engaging students and including their voices in decisions concerning the design of their learning is crucial. Differentiating between status variables such as socio-economic status and those variables that are amenable to change is important (Finn, 1993). Similarly, the distinction between indicators of engagement, such as those outcomes measured in the NSSE and ISSE, and facilitators of engagement, those contextual conditions that can be altered is essential if change is to be realised. Viewing students as collaborative partners in bringing about change is key and offers a counter narrative to the individual self-interest approaches implied in the ISSE. SaP embraces the ideal of a more authentic form of engagement that enables students' academic and social integration. SaP initiatives offer students the opportunity to exercise agency in their learning opening up the possibility of developing the critical consciousness that Freire (1996) and Giroux (1983) argue is the basis of social justice agendas. Finally, drawing on the work of Pownall (2020) whose recent experience as a student would assign her to the ranks of the unengaged if judged by ISSE metrics, I considered the suitability of attendance metrics as markers of student engagement. Conscious of the power dynamics that underpin this conception of the engaged student prompted Pownall to question and research who gets to decide what constitutes engagement and success for today's earner-learner student. Responding to her call for the inclusion of student voices in any redefining of HE success, this study aims to inform and perhaps open up that

debate in Irish HE.

## Chapter 4 – Methodology

### 4.1 Methodological approach

This chapter details the methodology and methods used to capture the how and why of SE in Irish HE, and to analyse the context specific policies, practices and conditions that facilitate SFI. The researcher's philosophical stance is articulated, and the adoption of a mixed methods concurrent design is justified. Theoretical frameworks that informed the approach to the quantitative and qualitative analysis are detailed. The data source and its features are outlined and the rationale for the analysis of student comments is reiterated. Adopting a critical realist philosophy and a mixed methods approach, the research explores the extent to which critical democratic engagement is facilitated and supported in Irish HE. Critical realism (CR) is proving to be one of the most influential new developments in the philosophy of science and the social sciences, as it provides a powerful alternative to positivism and post modernism (Archer et al., 1998). The literature on SE has been successful in developing theoretically-informed and research-based ways in which learning environments might be structured to improve the quality of students' learning. However, it is largely silent on the extent to which barriers to learning can be due to structural inequalities outside of the learning environment (Ashwin & McLean, 2005). Critical approaches foreground the structural inequalities and critical realist studies, as axiologically emancipatory, can seek to identify those causal mechanisms that impact on the SE phenomenon. In this way injustices can be exposed and examined. The use of mixed methods supported a detective-like approach to investigating the SE phenomenon, involving an open and active curiosity. My own definition of engagement, as predicated on reciprocity and teacher-student relationships,

posits that there is a link between classroom interactions and engagement. That a mixed method approach which draws on survey data is most appropriate for the investigation is supported by Pianta et al, (2012) who observe that although classrooms are complex, social systems and student-teacher relationships and interactions are also complex. Research that focuses on this complexity can benefit from a dialectical balance in research design that combines experiments and rich description of processes (Pianta et al., 2012). Furthermore, this study adopts a similar approach to Hurtado et al., (2020) who analysed the responses in the 2020 Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), to investigate faculty preparedness for using critical pedagogies in the classroom. Crucially, however, like a good detective, the mixed methods approach has been applied using unobtrusive methods that minimised the contamination of evidence.

To reiterate, the study was framed by the following questions.

> **Research Question 1.**(RQ1) What can the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) qualitative comments tell us about what students consider engages them?
>
> **Research Question 2.**(RQ2) In what contexts do students and teachers interact and what is the nature and quality of these interactions?

### 4.1.1 Realism and Critical Realism (CR)

Realism is a generic term for theories that comprise statements regarding the truth or falsity of real or existing entities (Hesse, 1984). There are a number of diverse philosophies of realism, but they are united in their belief in a realist ontology and a constructivist epistemology (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010). A realist ontology accepts that there is a real world out there that is independent of our constructions, theories or perceptions of it. A constructivist epistemology, on the

other hand, accepts that any understanding of the world is a construction of our own making influenced by our own standpoints and perspectives. For the realist, reality is real but influenced by the researcher's values, and can only be imperfectly understood, so the use of triangulation from various sources is advisable. Realists adopt a philosophical stance that is compatible with both qualitative and quantitative methodologies facilitating communication and cooperation between the two (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010). The data used in this study is both quantitative and qualitative which when coupled with the use of human and computer assisted methods of analysis allowed the results to be triangulated. "Realism seems like the only way forward if one wishes to call off the search for 'general laws' without simply abandoning the goal of causal explanation" (Gorski, 2013, p.659). Realists acknowledge differences between the real world and their particular view of it and try to construct various views of this reality that are relative in time and place (Riege, 2003).

#### 4.1.2 Critical Realism (CR)

CR is a relatively new paradigmatic position that contrasts with Positivism and Interpretivism. It is often seen as a middle way between empiricism and positivism on the one hand, and anti-naturalism or interpretivism on the other. One of the ways that CR goes beyond positivism is in its rejection of the idea that social science can, or should be, ethically neutral. Critical realists see criticism of socially unjust arrangements as part of their role, as do most social scientists (Elder-Vass, 2019). In seeking to identify causal mechanisms that impact on a phenomenon, actions can be identified that can improve people's conditions (Haigh et al., 2019). However, ontological and epistemological positions are

influenced by the values one holds and accordingly research cannot be value free (Greenbank, 2003).

CR studies are axiologically emancipatory in nature, given their starting point that improvements in society are possible (Danermark & Ekström, 2019). However, critical realists need to remain ethically humble and open to the possibility that their positions may change as they learn more from voices that have not yet been heard (Danermark & Ekström, 2019). This is important given this study's aim of listening to and amplifying the student voice in conversations about SE. CR asserts that there is a reality that exists independent of our thoughts, and that while observation might increase our confidence in its existence, existence itself is not dependent on our observation (Sayer, 2002). CR presents a critique of ontological monovalence premised on the idea that only things that are present exist (Bhaskar, 1998). Bhaskar argues that the universe, including the social world, is a stratified and open system of emergent entities. However, CR makes no claim that these stratified layers of reality are self-evident or directly observable. Critical realists emphasise that even intentionally constructed social structures, such as formal organisations, have unintended effects that may not be evident to the actors themselves (Gorski, 2013). It is this aspect of the causal mechanisms, that are not directly observable or measurable in the ISSE quantitative questions, that the ISSE student comments can expose. The emancipatory basis for CR research is that by examining phenomena it may be possible to identify mechanisms or properties of structures that have an influence on events. What is missing from much of the research on SE are student voices whose words can serve to name those mechanisms or structures that impact on their capacity to engage.

The search for causation inherent within CR helps researchers to explain social events, while it also offers practical policy recommendations to address social problems (Fletcher, 2016). As Bhaskar (1998) argues, we can only understand the social world if we understand the social structures that give rise to a phenomenon, and for this study, the underlying social structures that impact on SE in Irish HE. The philosophy of CR focuses on explaining what is experienced with reference to the underlying structures of reality that shape observable events: i.e., what students in Irish HE consider to be conducive to their engagement cannot be separated from the context of their engagement experience.

CR is not to be confused with naive empirical scientific realism which assumes 'what you see is what you get'. An important tenet of CR is that ontology is not reducible to epistemology, as human knowledge only captures a small part of a deeper and vast reality (Fletcher, 2016). In this way, CR differs from positivism which limits reality to what can be known using scientific methods, and constructivism which views reality as entirely constructed through human knowledge and discourse. Despite their opposing views of reality, both positivism and constructivism "reduce(s) reality to human knowledge, whether that knowledge acts as lens or container for reality" (Fletcher, 2016, p.182). By contrast, critical realists embrace epistemological relativism, a view that considers description and narration as not being straightforwardly representational of reality (Crotty, 1998). Rather, the critical realist's position is that our knowledge of reality is a result of social functioning and cannot be understood independently of the social actors involved in the knowledge derivation process.

Speaking in support of CR, Archer (1999) argues that “It contributes both to clarifying the ‘what’ questions and to some initial strategies for trying to answer the ‘why’ questions, not in any final sense, but in helping to build up an exploratory knowledge that purports to actually deal with the real” (Archer et al., 1999, p.12). In the same publication, Rachel Sharp (Archer et al., 1999) highlights some of the advantages that CR offers the social researcher. Firstly, a stratified ontology distinguishes between the real and the actual in open systems. Secondly, social structures and human agency exhibit causal powers and the task of the researcher is to explore and explain their interaction. Thirdly, there is a plurality of causes in an open world, many of which interact with each other producing a variety of effects in different circumstances. Indeed, many realists would argue that the emergent stratified nature of social reality means a wide range of methodological approaches or ‘extended methods’ is necessary for a richer conceptualisation of the mechanisms at work in the social world (Vincent & Mahoney, 2018, p.210). Accordingly, one must be a methodological pluralist, and therefore CR endorses a variety of research methods suitable for answering the research questions posed.

### 4.2. SE – what lies beneath

The literature review has highlighted the many gaps in our understanding of what engages the diverse students attending our HE institutions. The importance of understanding the context-specific, social and idiosyncratic nature of SE in learning environments has been highlighted (Bae & Lai, 2020, p.1129) and echoing Vibert and Sheilds (2003) calls for adopting democratic critical pedagogies. Yet, as detailed in the earlier chapters, when students speak up in the ISSE, in the only questions of the survey that give them voice (Bryson, 2014),

their words only reach the eyes and ears of a chosen few in their local context. Their voices in this context are muted, permitted only to provide data, having little power over the outcomes affected by their participation (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015).

Quantitative surveys such as the ISSE can only offer proxy levels of SE with their promise of measurement illusory (Bryson, 2014) as the quantitative indices fail to explain the underlying causal mechanisms that impact on students' willingness and opportunity to engage. The literature review explored the influence of habitus, cultural reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1990), and structure on student agency. The cultural norms, ways of acting and speaking in academia can serve to exclude those whose skills, experiences and backgrounds do not fit with the expectations of HE. These expectations are set by those in power, whose exercise of leadership constructs consent among subordinate groups (Joseph, 2007). This is what Joseph identifies as hegemony, a concept which, in its simplest sense, is concerned with the plans and actions of social agents, groups and individuals. For hegemony to survive it must be structured and objective and needs institutions to maintain it (Joseph, 2007).

If we are to understand more fully the engagement experiences of all our students, it is necessary to listen directly to what students consider to be those factors or enabling conditions that are most engaging to them. It is the job of the critical realist to identify the factors that constrain student freedom or agency and crucially, change them. Ontologically, CR combines a realist ontology, the acceptance that reality exists independently of our understanding of it, in part at least, and based on epistemological relativism, that all claims to knowledge are socially produced and contextually situated. In this way it treats engaging with empirical data as important but engagement with observers' explanations of data

as also being critical (Fletcher, 2020). For these reasons, CR is the most appropriate philosophical framework for a study that draws on the multi-year ISSE datasets, that include both quantitative and qualitative data.

While many of the enabling conditions are observable, it is the hidden and underlying causes of SE or alienation that we need to understand if the aim of success for all students is to be achieved. This, it is argued, demands that the researcher views the comments in the ISSE through a critical lens, reading 'between the lines' searching beyond the manifest content for latent undercurrents. The literature review considered how structures in HE can influence and impact on students' capacity to act with agency (Bourdieu, 1990; MacFarlane, 2017). A critical research orientation aligns with what Creswell (2014) calls a transformative worldview, that unveils power imbalances and injustices with the distinct aim of effecting change. "This philosophical worldview focuses on the needs of groups and individuals in our society that may be marginalized or disenfranchised" (Creswell, 2014, p.39). All social structures possess causal powers and liabilities that enable or constrain it from acting in certain ways (Fletcher, 2016) and the academy is no exception. The research paradigm of CR is a fitting ontological, epistemological and methodological framework for addressing the concerns surrounding engaging the diversity of today's HE students.

### 4.3 CR, SE and the Irish Student Survey of Engagement (ISSE)

The rationale for this study is based on the premise that the quantitative indices in the ISSE only provide measures of engagement against specific indicators, but they fail to explain or elucidate the contextual conditions that prompt or support SE. The ISSE records student reports on the frequency with

which they engaged in those high impact behavioural and cognitive practices that have been linked to academic success (Kuh, 2009). However, emotional psychological engagement is a prerequisite for student successful integration into HE and is linked to SFI both inside and outside the classroom (Bovill, 2020). Bryson (2014) whose criticism of the NSSE's illusory proxy for engagement and how it offers students no voice save that in the predetermined responses, sees engagement as linked to students' experience of teaching, learning, and their integration into academic life (Bryson, 2010). The integration that Bryson refers to comprises both social and academic integration (Tinto, 1997), connecting on an emotional level. The low levels of SFI recorded in the ISSE quantitative indices provided the rationale for listening to what students said in their open-ended comments about how, why, and where they engage with their studies. This was the problem that triggered the research and guided the development of theory. Bhaskar's CR (1979) is supportive of using an existing theory or hypothesised theory as a starting point for research. "'Once a hypothesis about a generative structure has been produced in social science it can be tested quite empirically, although not necessarily quantitatively (Bhaskar, 1979, p.62 in Fletcher, 2016, p.184).

My initial reading of the student comments in the ISSE led to the development of a student-led theory of engagement reproduced here.

> Student engagement is predicated on, and realised through, an inherently relational and reciprocal process of teaching and learning (Short, 2020).

The student comments that informed this definition spoke of friendly enthusiastic, passionate, and understanding lecturers and tutors, who demonstrated understanding support and care for their students, all traits,

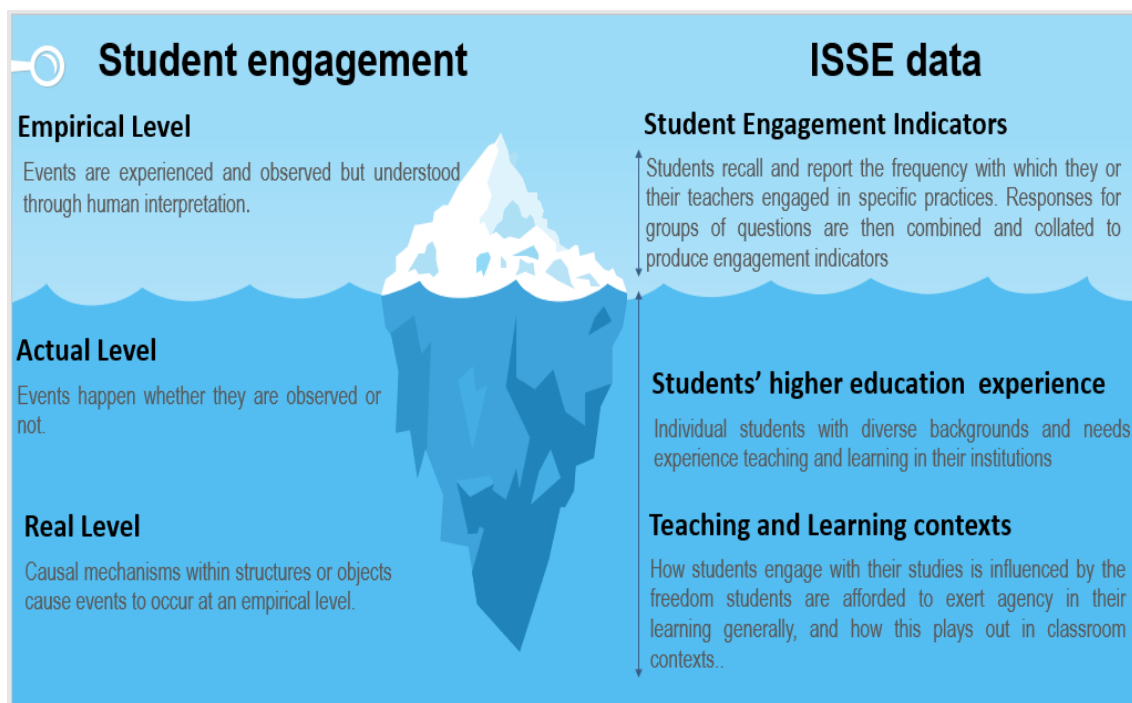
characteristics or practices that are not captured in the quantitative indices. These are categorised in the school system under the heading of Classroom Emotional Climate (CEC) and comprise the quality of social and emotional interactions between teachers who demonstrate support, facilitate student autonomy, and influence student achievement (Reyes et al., 2012; Hamre & Pianta, 2005). However, if the emotional climate has similar effects on students in HE as research in the school sector confirms, then this is an aspect of engagement that is not and cannot be captured in the fixed response quantitative questions in the ISSE. However, clues as to the impact of emotional climate in teaching contexts can be gleaned from the mini narratives that students submit in response to the open-ended questions. To gauge how students appear to engage emotionally in the classroom would require classroom observation and even then, the results would be filtered through the eyes of the observer. Furthermore, although observation may offer the best chance of capturing student emotional engagement in the classroom, this only accesses the event at an empirical level.

### 4.3.1 CR as a stratified ontology

As a research paradigm, CR is distinguished from the other paradigms specifically by its emphasis on ontological depth, or a stratified ontology, maintaining that any social phenomenon can be studied at three ontological layers – namely the real, the actual and the empirical (Bhaskar, 1998). At the *empirical* level events are experienced and interpreted by humans who observe them. At the *actual* level events occur whether they are observed or not, and at the *real* level events happen or are caused to occur by mechanisms within structures or objects.

Fletcher (2016) captures a stratified ontology using the metaphor of an iceberg. The domain of the real comprises mechanisms or structures that exist independent of human knowledge and although often not observable, they possess tendencies that cause events to happen. Thus, at the empirical level the researcher can only access a partial view of reality as these observations are influenced by context (Bhaskar, 1998). Figure 4 adapts Fletcher's iceberg metaphor for the SE phenomenon and the ISSE survey illustrating how a CR approach can serve to reveal those causal tendencies that give rise to actual events (Fletcher, 2016).

**Figure 4** – Student engagement in Irish higher education – a critical realist view




The qualitative comments in the ISSE provided new, unique, and rare data to answer the a priori research questions (LaDonna et al., 2018). Adopting a mixed methods approach, the analysis of the comments was used to explain the quantitative indices and help identify causal explanations for the indices.

## 4.4 Secondary data – answering new questions with old data

As previously mentioned, it was the perplexing and personally surprising results of the SFI index that first prompted me to request access to the ISSE data. This did not fit in with my perception of the quality and frequency of interaction that I have with my own students. I suspected that closer analysis of the data and specifically the student comments, could provide clues that would function as leads for further investigation. This study involved the secondary analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data. "Secondary analysis is the re-analysis of data for the purpose of answering the original research questions with better statistical techniques or answering new research questions with old data" (Glass, 1976, p.3 cited in Smith 2008). The analysis of secondary datasets enables longitudinal analyses, for re-interpretation of existing research and for engaging in exploratory work to test new ideas, theories, or models of research designs (Smith, 2008).

Despite the numerous methodological, theoretical, and pedagogical benefits that secondary data analysis offers, it is a relatively under-used technique in education research and in the social sciences more widely (Smith, 2008). This is surprising given that it is a method that is perfectly suited to researchers with macro-interests and micro-resources, due to the availability of high-quality datasets that are often free. However, alongside the benefits in time and cost, secondary data analysis also delivers social benefits such as the building of capacity in research communities (Smith, 2008). Furthermore, secondary data analyses of population cohort studies overcome the sample size limitations associated with primary data collection. Population cohort studies rely on large samples that have been broadly assessed using state-of-the-art measures. It follows that population cohort studies enable well-powered studies

of high scientific rigour and validity, whose findings generalise widely (Cave & Stumm, 2020, p.2).

While the way researchers use secondary data can vary, the purpose of its use in this study was to answer new research questions using old data (Glass, 1976 in Smith, 2008). Research questions that seek to explore what students nationally across Irish HE consider engages them can pose challenges for the researcher when accessing a sample. Interviewing students would perhaps offer the best chance of eliciting fulsome accounts of student experiences generating thick and rich description (Geertz, 1973) but this would pose resource challenges for a researcher seeking to capture students' views nationally. While questionnaires are used less frequently, as they tend not to provide the type of elaboration that researchers can access when conducting interviews, they nevertheless can produce rich narrative accounts when free text responses are allowed.

Open-ended questions in surveys where the respondent answers in their own words allow a spontaneous response (Popping, 2015, p.24). Conversely, closed questions, which are characterised by assisted responses that are constructed in an a priori way, will possibly fail to provide an appropriate set of alternatives meaningful in substance or wording to respondents (Popping, 2015). "The distinction between the type of response in an open-ended question and a closed question, is a way to measure the issues saliency" (Geer, 1991, cited in Popping 2015, p.24).

## 4.5 Student open-ended comments as data

Proponents of open-ended questions have long claimed that this format taps concerns that are important to respondents' political calculations and also

that these kinds of questions allow citizens to identify issues that are most salient to them (RePass, 1971 cited in Geer, 1991). Using undergraduates as subjects and an experimental design, Geer tested the extent to which the issues raised in open-ended questions were “salient” or “superficial” concerns. While emphasising that the evidence produced was narrow in focus, Geer concluded that the results address the criticism that open-ended questions only tap superficial concerns, confirming that these questions can be “useful in efforts to assess public opinion” (Geer, 1991). Accordingly, it is argued here that the issues raised in the comments submitted by students in Irish HE in the first seven years of the ISSE, represent the most salient aspects of their experience. The free text data in the survey may not provide the depth of description available to interviewers, who can probe respondents further, but it does deliver a breath of data – ‘a wisdom of the many’ benefit. Studies that used data from open-ended questions (McColl et al., 1998) revealed that their inclusion may improve response rates, thus minimising nonresponse bias. Bias in response can produce errors in results when there is evidence that the respondents differ from the general population (Dillman, 2007). Furthermore, survey comments serve to elaborate on, or explicate findings from the closed questions and can identify new and salient issues not covered in the quantitative questions (O’Cathain & Thomas, 2004). Analysing open-ended comments can not only generate insights into respondents’ experiences unavailable through statistical techniques, but also highlight organisational issues (Jackson & Trochim, 2002; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007 cited in Behar-Horenstein & Feng, 2018). Chambers and Chiang (2011) analysed the open-ended comments in the US based NSSE revealing students’ own sense of the multidimensional and rich experiences that

impact on their educationally meaningful activities. However, they noted as all their data was gathered at one institution, that the influence of context may present limitations as to how results are interpreted, suggesting that a multi-institutional study may yield different comments, codes and study conclusions.

Clynes et al. (2020) used the NSSE to explore the factors that impacted on nursing students' engagement with their studies in four higher educational institutions in the Republic of Ireland. Using the statistical package, SPSS, independent $t$-tests were used to compare differences in engagement between students by year of study (first and final year), institution type, and age and the qualitative comments were used to complement the statistical reporting. Results were broadly in line with previous national engagement levels except for the Quality of Interactions (QI) which was lower than the national population (ISSE, 2017). The themes identified in the open-ended responses mirror those found in this study. The authors of that study argued that survey methods were unable to capture the complexity of the student experience recommending that future research gather more detailed qualitative data using interviews or focus groups. However, while focus groups and interviews may elicit richer and longer narratives, they will still be limited by the numbers of respondents and the number of institutions that can partake. The use of multi-institutional and multiyear corpus comments in this study addresses Chambers and Chiang's recommendations and the weaknesses that Clynes et al (2020), identify in their research.

### 4.5.1 Large scale national studies that use open-ended data

In addition to the small-scale studies that have used open-ended data, large scale multi-institutional studies that draw on national datasets, as this study does, have been conducted in other jurisdictions. In Australia, Scott (2005) used

a database of 168,376 comments submitted by 94,835 students to analyse responses to the open-ended 'what is best' and 'what could improve' questions contained in a Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ). The study produced one of the first in the world reports that systematically analysed an enormous database of student comments about their tertiary experience. Drawing on a representative sample of 14 universities across Australia, the study was facilitated by the development of an IT-enabled qualitative analysis tool (CEQuery). The CEQuery software classifies comments into five main domains – Outcomes, Staff, Course Design, Assessment and Support. Scott cited compelling reasons for analysing student comments arguing that it is imperative that universities use student feedback to gauge the quality of the student experience in order not only to gain, but also retain students (Scott, 2005, p.iv).

In the UK in 2014, a major study was commissioned by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) to analyse student comments contained in the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES). The HEA facilitates the administration of the survey to provide sector-benchmarked results, enabling institutions to evaluate and inform improvements to the postgraduate taught (PGT) student experience. The study conducted by Zaitseva and Milsom (2016) involved the analysis of student responses to two open-ended questions contained in the PTES. "At the national level, these comments represent the collective voice of PGT students and reveal the experiences of postgraduate taught provision in the UK in their own words" (Zaitseva & Milsom, 2016, p.3). In what was the first attempt to look at PGT student feedback at a sectoral level, the researchers used the text mining software Leximancer to improve the efficiency of the analysis.

### 4.5.2 Open-ended comments as qualitative data

Open-ended questions share many of the features of qualitative data in that respondents can compose answers in their own words with little structure imposed upon them, allowing researchers to present the words in the form of direct quotes to support conclusions. However, some argue that this data is often scant therefore lacking attention to context and conceptual richness (O'Cathain & Thomas, 2004). However, the extent to which the questions are specific and directed, coupled with the length of the responses, can often determine whether the data should be treated qualitatively or quantitatively. In this regard, the ISSE free text responses reflect the specific and directed nature of the two open-ended questions as students are invited to comment on specific aspects, 'what is best' and 'what could improve' about their HE experiences.

LaDonna et al. (2018), in their critique of the use of open-ended survey questions as qualitative data in mixed methods health profession research, argue that while methods can be integrated strategically to productive effect, they can also be combined blithely, with negative implications for the quality of the insights that the research produces (La Donna et al., 2018, p.3). Their arguments hinge on the lack of space for comment offered to students in surveys, the response box restricted by researchers who want to limit the length of comments, an aspect of design that leads to data lacking in conceptual richness (La Donna et al., 2018, p.4). However, limitations in box size are normally associated with paper based rather than web-based surveys. The ISSE places no restrictions on student respondents as evidenced by the many long narratives submitted. Another criticism levelled at student free text comments as data is that, where it is used, the research often pays little attention to context and draws on relatively small

samples which are rarely analysed using rigorous qualitative procedures. To qualify as robust qualitative research, whether using content, thematic, discursive, or linguistic procedures, qualitative studies must do more than count (LaDonna et al., 2018, p.5). However, they acknowledge that exceptions exist and that valuable contributions to knowledge can be made if the free text data is "new, unique, or rare" and appropriate for answering specific a priori research questions. The authors specifically single out two studies for mention: Myers et al.'s (2011) use of thematic analysis and concordance software to describe patterns in clinical teaching assessments and identify improvements, and the Ginsburg et al. (2011) study on the evaluation of medical resident training and their relationship to a competency framework. LaDonna et al. (2018) note that both sets of authors demonstrated rigour in their analysis by presenting their data alongside the extant literature and conceptual frameworks. In doing so, the rigour of the analysis compensated for what LaDonna et al. (2018) see as a lack of richness in survey comments. However, rather than suggesting that researchers should avoid open-ended data, echoing O'Cathain & Thomas (2004), they recommend that researchers should tap into the potential of qualitative comments to corroborate answers to the closed questions, enhance the quantitative findings, and inspire new avenues for research (O'Cathain & Thomas, 2004, p.6).

This study benefits from the volume of secondary data available for analysis, the specific and directed nature of the open-ended questions, and the lack of any restriction on the length or depth of student comments. Furthermore, the consistently high response rates among respondents across the seven years of the survey demonstrates an absence of survey fatigue amongst respondents (Porter & Whitcomb, 2004).

## 4.6 CR research designs

Seeking to identify the operation of social mechanisms allows critical realists to be flexible and eclectic in their research designs, but in all cases ontological questions come before epistemological ones. The role of the research method in CR studies is to connect the inner world of ideas to the outer world of observable events (Ackroyd & Karlsson, 2014). Critical realists repeatedly ask which concepts they need to understand to explore more fully the social mechanisms under investigation. They are ever conscious of the role of both the concepts and the data in the synthesis to explain the interaction of social mechanisms and processes. The approach to the selection of research methods in CR studies is by necessity both flexible and adaptive, always with the goal of developing understanding. What is required is intellectual creativity rather than methodological rules. As a realist philosophy, CR maintains a strong emphasis on ontology and supports the idea of a reality (intransitive domain) which exists independently of our knowledge or perception of it (Zachariadis et al., 2013, p.856). However, knowledge is generated through human activity that depends upon the transitive domain: the specific details and processes of its production in the form of established facts, theories, models, methods, and techniques of investigation, used by researchers leading to “a socially produced knowledge of a natural human-independent thing” (Archer et al., 1998, p.65 cited in Zachariadis et al., 2013).

### 4.6.1 CR as an emerging paradigm for Mixed Methods Research (MMR)

The research questions guiding this study are partially concerned with the individual and their subjective experience of the world, but they also seek to understand more fully those conditions in Irish HE that support SE. An exclusively interpretivist approach would be subjectivist, attempting to understand what students in Irish HE, in their own context, perceive engagement to be and how they make sense of their experiences. However, understanding how context influences SE attitudes and behaviours, and a belief that what we as researchers, and students as participants, see or observe is only a small part of reality, necessitates exploring 'the bigger picture'. A growing number of authors have advocated a CR perspective for mixed methods studies (Maxwell and Mittapalli, 2010). CR distinguishes between causes, events and what we can know about them.

## 4.7 Mixed methods – the third paradigm

MMR has been termed the third methodological movement (paradigm), with quantitative and qualitative methods representing the first and second movements (paradigms), respectively (Teddlie & Tashakkori 2009). MMR involves the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, integrating both forms of data and their results, using specific mixed methods designs and framing the study theoretically and philosophically (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009) declare mixed methods to be emancipatory in nature as it is inclusive of all methodological traditions. The choice of a mixed methods study is not dependent on the problem or topic. Rather, mixed methods designs are appropriate for a wide variety of research

topics where one type of data is insufficient and where the analysis of one data source provides incomplete understanding (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017). There is often a dividing line between quantitative and qualitative research, as it assumed that quantitative research draws on positivistic ontologies, while qualitative research draws more upon interpretative, critical, and constructivist research traditions. Some may argue that these approaches are so diverse as to be diametrically opposed, whereas others, adopting a pragmatic approach, believe that different techniques can work together. The latter was the stance I adopted. Qualitative research typically answers research questions that address 'how' and 'why' questions whereas quantitative research typically addresses 'how often' and 'how many'. Adopting a mixed method design for the investigation of SE in Irish HE, as captured in the ISSE, provided new insights that served to flesh out and explain the quantitative indices, facilitating the development of theory. While qualitative techniques may be useful for some aspects of the research, broader triangulated methods may need to be considered (Archer et al., 1999). Sayer highlights the ecumenical nature of CR methods of data collection arguing that the methodological choices should align with the objects of the study and while case studies are often used, observation, focus groups, literature reviews, and surveys are equally appropriate (Sayer, 2000).

The research questions guiding this study sought, using the free text responses contained in a national dataset, to understand more fully those conditions in Irish HE that best support SE. Research questions that rely on linguistic rather than numerical data and that employ meaning rather than statistical forms of data analysis, normally fall with the interpretive paradigm (Polkinghorne,1997). However, as Elliott and Timaluk (2015) caution, simply

distinguishing between words and numbers is not enough. Rather, interpretive designs should be influenced by the extent to which the research employs open exploratory questions which seek to understand phenomena allowing for unlimited descriptions to emerge. These descriptions are aimed at discovering something new rather than confirming or dismissing a hypothesis. Critical realists, while sharing the interpretivist stance that social phenomena need interpretive understanding, differ from interpretivists in that they don't exclude causal explanation (Sayer, 2000 cited in Zachariadis et al., 2010).

### 4.8 Mixed methods and the researcher's philosophical position

The benefits that a mixed methods design can deliver may be offset by its challenges for researchers who hold opposing or contrary epistemologies allied to their research approaches. While combining two methods can present twice the difficulty for the researcher, this is addressed by establishing a clear connection between your reasons for combining approaches and a correspondingly appropriate research design. Advocates of MMR respond to critics who highlight this challenge by claiming a methodological eclecticism framed within the Pragmatism paradigm (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2012). They subscribe to a paradigm pluralism that justifies the selection of approaches that suit different aspects of the study, thereby rejecting the "incompatibility thesis" that links theoretical with methodological traditions (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2012, p.776).

However, the practical challenges associated with using a mixed methods approach require researchers to have a broader set of skills than required if using a single method. In particular, the researcher not only needs to understand and justify why they are mixing data sources, but also how the results of the analysis

will be integrated. While Fielding (2012) argues that mixed methods allow for greater analytic density, the extent to which the data is integrated will depend on whether the different methods can be interpreted together in a meaningful way, the bringing together of the information is crucial (Fielding, 2012, p.127). In this study, the integration of data sources aligned with the stages of the research: initial data exploration, to theory generation, and the use of retroduction to address the questions posed. Retroduction in critical realist studies refers to the use of a distinctive form of inference that argues that events can be explained by identifying the potential causal powers and mechanisms that produce them (Hu, 2018).

### 4.9 Corpus survey data and mixed methods research

The research questions guiding this research were suitable for adopting an MMR design. The use of inductive, deductive and retroductive reasoning to analyse the qualitative comments served to explain the what, how and why of SE in Irish HE. Adopting an open, flexible, iterative approach to analysis, description was initially emphasised over measurement. However, the availability of the corpus quantitative responses allowed for the use of more structured procedures of analysis. Here, the emphasis was on objectivity of process in the development and testing of theory and the validity and reliability of findings. However, neither approach on their own was deemed sufficient to address perceived power imbalances in the student-teacher nexus, a theme that emerged in the qualitative content analysis of the comments. For that reason, thematic analysis of the student comments framed within a critical realist ontology was employed to access latent meaning and investigate underlying causes. The following sections discuss the use of mixed methods in more detail and how CR was used as a

framework to guide the analysis.

## 4.10 Mixed methods concurrent designs

Researchers have proposed five purposes of MMR from complementarity to triangulation, initiation, development, and expansion and each of the purposes is essentially based on the logic for integrating both methodologies (Riazi & Candlin, 2014). The research aim of understanding how and why students in Irish HE engage with their studies can best be described as complementarity, the process of mixing the data types to expand the explanatory power of the study. The underlying logic for complementarity rests on viewing social phenomena as multi-layered. The two components (quantitative and qualitative) of an MMR study are thus used to address different research questions relating to different aspects or layers of social phenomena (Riazi & Candlin, 2014, p.144).

When complementarity is the aim, this is best achieved when each method is carried out concurrently and interdependently. While this may cause challenges for studies that collect primary data, the use of a secondary data source that contains both types of data, eliminates this step. The availability of complete data sets also allowed for a backwards and forwards approach to analysing the data throughout the period of the study.

Concurrent mixed method data collection and analysis strategies have been employed to validate one form of data with the other form, to transform the data for comparison, or to address different types of questions (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007, p.118). In addition, the availability of survey data that contains both types of data means that the same individuals are providing both qualitative and quantitative data facilitating the comparison between the data. In summary, the availability of a secondary corpus data that comprises quantitative and

qualitative responses facilitated the adoption of a mixed methods concurrent research design for the study of the SE phenomenon in Irish HE. This allowed for different levels of reality to be established, and causality explained, all while maintaining an open systems approach.

### 4.11 Methods – approach to data analysis for mixed methods designs

Key to the qualitative analysis process is diminishing any doubt surrounding the reliability and validity of qualitatively produced findings and formulating a serious method of data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Adopting an adapted mixed methods concurrent design facilitated the use of the qualitative data contained in the ISSE to build on and explain the quantitative indices (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The research placed the students at the centre of the inquiry, positioning them as the experts on the SE phenomenon. By drawing on the student authored comments, the research invited them to describe their experience of SE in their own words without the constraints of closed questions.

### 4.12 Criticisms of MMR

Despite an increasing interest in MMR for educational studies, critics argue that while they deliver demonstrated benefits, they have limitations and challenges. Symonds and Gorard (2010) in their research concluded that having emerged from the mixing of two stereotypes, MMR was in danger of acting in opposition to its own aims by inadvertently inhibiting new growth in research.

Driscoll et al. (2020) cite a frequent criticism among qualitative researchers, that is, the loss of depth and flexibility when qualitative data is quantified. Citing Bazeley (2004), they point to the multidimensional nature of

qualitative code meanings, that can and do provide insights into a host of interrelated conceptual themes or issues during analysis. Quantifying this data may render it a one-dimensional conceptual category that cannot be revisited in light of new insights. “In short, reducing rich qualitative data to dichotomous variables renders them singly dimensional and immutable” (Driscoll et al., 2020, p.25). However, it is the lack of meaningful or true integration of the two data types this is often of most concern for critics. That prompted Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) to caution researchers using MMR to ensure that they know exactly why both types of data are needed, and crucially how they will demonstrate rigour when reporting their procedures. This issue of how well data sources are integrated in MMR is an area that is both under-theorised and underdeveloped in many mixed method studies (Bazeley & Kemp, 2012).

### 4.13 Data source

As detailed in the introduction, the study used the ISSE datasets, 2013–2019 inclusive. The complete survey questions are included in Appendix A but as discussed earlier, the survey includes two open-ended questions which invite students to submit their answers in free text form. The two questions are the last two questions in a 67-question survey and are worded as follows.

What does your insitute do best to engage you in learning?
What could your institute do to improve students’ engagement in learning?

Table 2 (page 40) in the introduction details the response rates for the open-ended questions. The high level of response to the open-ended questions indicates the leverage and saliency of the issues raised in the minds of students. Leverage-salience theory (Groves et al., 2000) is a unifying theory that explains survey nonresponse. It suggests that a single survey design attribute will have

different leverages for different respondents, and that leverage is activated if the attribute is salient or important to the respondent. Salience (Geer, 1991) equates to the importance of the question or topic in the mind of the respondent. The perception of salience can also be influenced by the positioning of the attribute, with questions at the end of a long survey conveying the impression that they are an afterthought (Edwards et al.,1997). Given that the open-ended questions in the ISSE come at the end of a long survey, the 50% response rate indicates the importance to students of the topics and questions.

Similarly, the representativeness of the data needs to be considered and the possibility of non-response bias. Low response rates raise the possibility that those who choose to answer open-ended questions could be different from the overall respondents. Reynolds et al. (2020) cautioned researchers to consider the influence of non-response bias on issues of generalisability. They studied non-response bias in Medicaid surveys and found that the specificity of the open-ended question can impact on response, with more generic type questions yielding less comments. Mossholder et al. (1995) agree, arguing that the wording of open-ended questions often implies they are optional and less important. Non-directive questions such as “Any other comments?” or “Is there anything else you would like to add?” are particularly prone (Smyth et al., 2020), but less of an issue when the questions are more specific, as is the case with the ISSE.

Wallis (2012), cited in Miller & Dumford (2014), found that a respondent’s language proficiency and positive affect increase the likelihood of receiving open-ended responses, while the type of device being used may also influence whether a response is added (Miller & Dumford, 2014). Porter & Whitcomb (2004) explored the impact of survey fatigue, defined as the time and effort involved in

survey participation, on non-response rates in general. Given that the open-ended questions in the ISSE are presented at the end of a series of 67 questions, it is possible that the positioning of these questions may impact on student response rates (Edwards et al., 1997). That said, Porter and Whitcomb (2004), citing Laurie et al. (1999), observe that survey participation can be impacted by salience and timing effects. They contend that students targeted in multiple surveys eventually feel like they had done enough and may choose not to participate. In the ISSE, where students can be invited to respond in four or five separate years, survey fatigue could impact on response rates and non-response bias. While it is impossible to test this in an anonymous survey, if students who have submitted feedback in the past and have not seen any evidence that their feedback was heard or acted upon, could have an impact on response rates. However, although student responses were not specifically analysed by year of study, the availability of the demographic data revealed that some of the most detailed and enlightening comments are submitted by students who self-identified as final-year students.

## 4.14 Methods – approach to data analysis for mixed methods designs

Key to the qualitative analysis process is diminishing any doubt surrounding the reliability and validity of qualitatively produced findings and formulating a serious method of data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Adopting an adapted mixed methods concurrent design facilitated the use of the qualitative data contained in the ISSE to build on and explain the quantitative indices. Following this, the qualitative content analysis of the comments led to the development of theory on the predictive influence of the ISSE indicator variables on SE with Linear Regression used to test this theory.

### 4.14.1 Procedure for data analysis

Probably the most daunting challenge facing qualitative researchers is what to do with the data. Overwhelmed by the volume of the data researchers have collected, they may jump to premature conclusions unaware of their a priori influences (Sandelowski,1995). Qualitative approaches to research are located within the Interpretive paradigm. Interpretivism is concerned with the individual and seeks to understand the subjective world of human experience and understand that experience from within. Qualitative research adopts a naturalistic approach to study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Denzin,1995). Interpretivist Social Science is rooted in an empathetic understanding or 'verstehen' (Dilthey,1977) of the lived experience of people in specific contexts. It is the job of the researcher using interpretive approaches to "gain access to people's 'common- sense thinking' and hence to interpret their actions and their social world from their point of view" (Bryman, 2012, p.30). Interpretivism is an approach to social research that emphasises socially constructed meaning and meaningful social action. Influenced by hermeneutics with the aim of making the obscure plain (Blaikie,1993, p.28), the emphasis is on close reading of text to discover embedded deeper, richer meanings. Whilst Positivist Social Science tries to mimic theory in natural settings using deductive axioms, theorems and causal laws, Interpretive Social Science is idiographic and inductive telling a story, describing and interpreting how people live out their daily lives (Neumann, 2011, p.105).

MMR addresses the strengths and weaknesses in both methods and, adopting a critical realist approach, ends the incompatibility thesis of world views

and argues that both can work together to address each other's limitations. Combining qualitative and quantitative data and methods allows us to explore the complexity of relationships in the social world. While different aspects can be analysed using different data and methods, it is not the data itself that is important but rather the extent to which the researcher is rigorous in their approach to the investigation of it. The analysis may involve an analytic approach to understanding a few controlled variables or a 'systemic' approach to understanding the interaction of variables in a complex environment. Ultimately though, we should concern ourselves less with the research methods chosen and more with their legitimisation for, and operationalisation of, them (Shannon-Baker, 2016). The following section describes how and why specific methods of data analysis were chosen and operationalised in this study.

#### 4.14.2 Qualitative description (QD)

"Qualitative descriptive studies have as their goal the comprehensive summary of events in the everyday terms of those events and are the method of choice when straight description of phenomena is sought" (Sandelowski, 2000, p.334). As the focus of this research is on the analysis of the ISSE qualitative data, although an array of theoretically and technically sophisticated methods are available to me, a QD approach is deemed most suitable for answering the questions posed.

"The value of qualitative description lies not only in the knowledge its use can produce, but also as a vehicle for presenting and treating research methods as living entities that resist simple classification" (Sandelowski, 2010, p.83). Despite its flexibility and utility, descriptive research is often depicted as the lowest rung on the quantitative research design hierarchy (Sandelowski, 2000,

p.334). Influenced by this prevalent view that description as the crudest form of inquiry, researchers seeking ‘epistemological credibility’ have engaged in ‘posturing’ (Wolcott,1992 in Sandelowski, 2000) by designating their work as phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography or narrative study. This, asserts Sandelowski (2000), has led some researchers to avoid naming their method as QD and to claim methods they are actually not using. She observes that despite being the most frequently employed methodologic approach, there exists no comprehensive description of this qualitative method. Addressing this lacuna, Sandelowski defines this basic or fundamental approach as involving the kind of interpretation that is low-inference and likely to result in consensus among researchers. While researcher choice influences what is described, these descriptions, however, must be presented in their proper sequence, the meanings participants attributed to them, demonstrating both descriptive and interpretive validity (Maxwell, 1992 cited in Sandelowski, 2000).

Although other approaches such as Phenomenology, Ethnography, or Grounded Theory (GT) are all methodologies aimed at qualitative description, they also have as a core aim the explanation of the phenomenon and are therefore not exclusively in the qualitative descriptive domain (Sandelowski, 2000). When the research seeks to describe a phenomenon enabling a fuller understanding of the same, then a generic qualitative approach to inquiry is appropriate with questions focusing on the what and how of the same. While the ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions of engagement will invariably lead to the ‘why’ questions, these are best postponed until a proper understanding of the phenomenon is achieved (Silverman, 2019).

In contrast to phenomenological, narrative, or ethnographic approaches, QD presents facts in everyday language. It is this aspect of QD that aligns most closely with the mixed methods design adopted in this study. The analysis of the corpus student comments is designed to explain the quantitative indices and crucially provide insights on the contextual factors that enable their active engagement. The research questions seek to understand what students in their own words are saying and, although unavoidably interpretive, I did not use abstract frameworks in the analysis of the mini narratives. Student comments were accepted at face value and coded into themes based on their qualitative content. However, a critical realist lens (Bhaskar, 1998) was used to explore those underlying unobservable causal factors present in the context that might present barriers to SE. In doing so, it allowed me to understand more fully the reasons behind the quantitative results such as the surprisingly low levels of SFI. As noted above, in deciding how best to approach the analysis of the corpus student comments, alternative approaches to analysis were considered: Phenomenology, Ethnography and Grounded Theory. The following sections explain the features of these methods and the types of questions and research data for which they are most suited.

### 4.15 Phenomenology, ethnography, and Grounded Theory (GT)

SE is a complex phenomenon that is subject to multiple and varied interpretations. This research set out to understand and explain how students in Irish HE experienced and perceived the SE concept. As a research method, Phenomenology aims to reduce the experiences of persons to a description of the universal essence of the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2017). Phenomenology in its broadest sense calls for the study of direct experience, which is taken at

face value, behaviour being determined by the phenomena of experience rather than external objective and physically described reality (Husserl, 2012). Phenomenology has as its core aim the production of insightful descriptions of how people experience the world and requires the use of a special descriptive method for the analysis of consciousness. This normally translates into a need to gather deep information and perceptions that elicit thick description (Geertz, 1973). Thick description refers to the detailed account of field experiences in which the researcher makes explicit the patterns of cultural and social relationships and puts them in context (Holloway, 1997). While Phenomenology shares with qualitative content analysis the aim of bringing to the fore participants' individual experiences and perceptions, phenomenologists are guided by a general principle of minimum structure and maximum depth. Those researchers that use the interview for data collection in phenomenological studies can generate full and deep accounts of participants' experience thereby allowing for the understanding of subjective experience. The data used for this research comprised a corpus of student comments that range from one-word responses to full paragraphs. Given the volume of comments analysed and the variability in length and detail of comments, the principles of minimum structure and maximum depth could not be achieved in this study, so Phenomenology was discounted. Furthermore, as this study adopts a critical realist philosophy and has an emancipatory aim of amplifying the student voices, I am conscious of Apple's criticism that phenomenological description may lead us to forget that objective institutions and structures exist that have power and that can control our lives and our very perception (Apple, 1980).

### 4.15.1 Ethnography

Ethnography is the study of social interactions, behaviours, and perceptions that occur within groups, teams, organisations and communities, its roots traceable to the study of small rural, often remote, societies (Reeves et al., 2008). Located within the naturalistic approach to social science, which proposes that in so far as is possible, the social world should be studied in its natural state undisturbed by the researcher, natural settings should be the primary source of data as opposed to artificial settings such as experiments or formal interviews (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998). While Ethnography shares the aim of providing rich holistic insights into participants' attitudes, views, and actions through the collection of data, its emphasis is on the use of undisturbed settings with little interference from the researcher. This therefore rendered it unsuitable for addressing the research questions using the ISSE datasets.

### 4.15.2 Grounded Theory (GT)

"Grounded theory is a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed" (Strauss & Corbin, 1997, p.273, emphasis in original). GT has, since the 1980s, developed as the dominant qualitative approach in many disciplines. Its main purpose is that of theory building with any type of data. As an exploratory method, GT is particularly well suited for investigating social processes that have attracted little prior research attention, where the previous research is lacking in breadth and/or depth, or where a new point of view on familiar topics appears promising (Milliken, 2010). The SE construct is not lacking in research, rather it lacks an agreed and coherent definition. Furthermore, classical GT gathers data in iterative cycles of collection and analysis with each cycle building on the next in the building of theory. Taken

together, the existence of an extensive body of literature on the SE construct and the use of secondary datasets, rendered a GT approach inappropriate for the study.

### 4.16 Qualitative descriptive methods

As discussed, researchers who adopt qualitative descriptive studies stay close to their data focusing more on the surface meaning of words. However, qualitative description involves more interpretation than the quantitative description elicited in surveys, where conclusions are drawn from statistical tests. This limits what can be learned about the meanings participants give to the pre-set confines and operational definitions of concepts (Sandelowski, 2000).

The questions guiding this research aim to produce largely unadorned descriptions of what engages students in Irish HE. Based on the research questions posed and the nature of the qualitative data used, Content Analysis (CA) and specifically qualitative content analysis (QCA) was the preferred method for the analysis of the corpus student comments. QCA is the strategy of choice for QD studies due to its use of a dynamic form of analysis that is oriented towards summarising the data (Sandelowski, 2000).

#### 4.16.1 Content Analysis (CA)

CA is a general term for a number of different strategies used to analyse data that involve the unobtrusive systematic coding and categorising of large amounts of text. “Content analysis is any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages” (Holsti, 1969, p.14). The main purpose of CA is to make sense of the data so it can be presented to readers in an influential and rational way (Bogdan and Biklen,

1997). Although most often when CA is discussed, it refers to quantitative analysis, the term QCA has been applied to a range of non-quantitative analyses of messages (Mayring, 2004; Schreier,2013; Graneheim et al., 2017). Krippendorff defined CA as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context" (Krippendorff, 1980 p.21). Since then, many authors have adopted this understanding of CA as less to do with quantification of data and more to do with interpretation or hermeneutic understanding (Graneheim et al., 2017).

The flexibility in how CA can be applied makes it an attractive choice for the researcher (Cavanagh, 1997). The differing perspectives described in the literature is perhaps captured best in the work of Rosengren (1981). In attempting to reflect what he saw as the struggle between divergent philosophical positions, Rosengren argued that there was a convergence happening, leading to him defining CA as "...a family of analytic approaches ranging from impressionistic, intuitive, interpretive analyses to systematic strict textual analyses" (Rosengren, 1981, p.11).

### 4.16.2 Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) – ontology, epistemology, and methodology

QCA is a method of analysing qualitative data that focuses on both the content and context of the data emphasising differences and similarities in the data (Graneheim, et al., 2017). In the conduct of QCA, the researcher seeks to reveal trends and patterns among the words used, the frequency of their occurrence and any relationships between words or themes. QCA is largely influenced by the seminal work of Mayring (2004) who applied systematic methods of analysis in a longitudinal study of the psycho-social consequences of

unemployment. While identifying systematic procedures for QCA, Mayring notes that it can be combined with other qualitative procedures and this should be determined by the research questions and the characteristics of the data (Mayring, 2004). Unlike other qualitative research methods, Bengtsson notes that qualitative content analysis is not linked to any particular science, and there are fewer rules to follow (Bengtsson, 2016, p.8).

Despite this, there are challenges. “Its roots in different scientific paradigms contribute to challenges concerning ontology, epistemology, and methodology in research” (Graneheim et al., 2017, p.29). Ontologically, it is the researcher’s standpoint that determines the assumptions made, those with positivistic leanings seek objective truths while those who align with a hermeneutic stance, wish to connect the study participants, using interpretation to reveal meanings in the texts (Graneheim et al., 2017). Ontologically, I am in the hermeneutic camp when it comes to understanding what engages students in learning. It follows then that epistemologically, the knowledge produced following QCA is a co-creation between the researcher and the student comments in the ISSE (Mishler, 1986 in Graneheim et al., 2017). This co-creation will result in an interpretation balancing act. “On one hand, it is impossible and undesirable for the researcher not to add a particular perspective to the phenomena under study. On the other hand, the researcher must ‘let the text talk’ and not impute meaning that is not there” (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, p.111).

The quantification of the student comments in the initial stages of analysis, and the availability of corresponding quantitative data, allowed for the use of simple linear regression to test potential objective truths. The mixed methods design enabled the qualitative data to be used to explain or flesh out the

quantitative results, an aspect of the method that is reflected by Insch, Moore & Murphy (1997). They highlight how CA allows for the use of qualitative methods to capture richer, more nuanced themes and concepts in the data, while also allowing the use of quantitative techniques that assist with the description and presentation of the data.

However, the flexibility inherent in CA that facilitates its use with a variety of data, demands that the researcher is both systematic and objective in its application. It is the transparency of the processes and procedures used in the analysis that serve to assure both the credibility and replicability of the research (Berelson, 1952; Holsti, 1969). Regardless of the approach adopted, the analysis involves the reduction in the volume of the text using codes and categories that elicit meaning and realistic conclusions (Bengtsson, 2016; Schreier, 2013).

The analysis in this study involved the flexible use of both inductive and deductive approaches that were used concurrently, sequentially, and iteratively in a circular, spiralling process of analysis (Creswell, 1998). Unlike epidemiologic research design, pre-packaged designs from which to choose do not exist for qualitative research. Rather, multiple options exist from which to select (Crabtree & Miller, 1992) in iterative cycles that often involve the concurrent collection and interpreting of data. However, this can be an advantage as it is both methodologically eclectic (Harwood & Garry, 2003) but crucially it is highly sensitive to content (Krippendorff, 1980). The nonlinear and cyclical quality of the research process necessitates a flexible but systematic approach to the management of the data. The following description of how the data was analysed is designed to describe the decision trails during the process of analysis, thereby

facilitating “readers’ abilities to discern ‘the red thread’ throughout the entire work and to recognise whose voice they are hearing” (Graneheim et al., 2017, p.34).

#### 4.16.3 QCA and systematic analysis

A key feature of QCA is that it is systematic and, regardless of the approach adopted, the process invariably involves a series of steps from question formulation, selection of the sample, designing and applying a process of coding, attending to issues of credibility and trustworthiness, and finally analysing and interpreting the results (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

### 4.17 From manifest to latent analysis

Initially, CA dealt with “the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Berelson, 1952, p.18). However, over time, it has expanded to also include interpretations of latent content. Accessing latent content, the authors argue, involves interpreting the underlying meaning, in a search for the unifying ‘red thread’ between the lines of the text (Graneheim et al., 2017, p.32). Gray & Densten (1998) define manifest content as elements of the text that are physically present, identifiable, and capable of being counted. Citing Berg (1995), they compare manifest content to the surface structure present in a message, while latent content relates to the deep structural meaning conveyed in a message (Berg, 1995, p.176 in Gray & Densten, 1998, p.420). The researcher’s epistemological approach to interpretation of manifest and latent content followed Graneheim et al. who, using a two-dimensional model, captured how concrete (close) approaches to analysis produce phenomenological descriptions while more abstract (distant) analysis produces hermeneutic interpretation (Graneheim et al., 2017, p.30). Their model

took account of how approaches to the analysis of the data vary depending on the depth and level of abstraction versus that of interpretation. Conventional QCA uses an inductive approach and is appropriate when limited knowledge of the phenomenon under study is available and involves the researcher immersing themselves in the data to gain insights. Directed QCA uses prior incomplete theories which would benefit from further description as a theoretical framework for a deductive approach to the analysis of the data.

### 4.18 From induction to deduction and back again

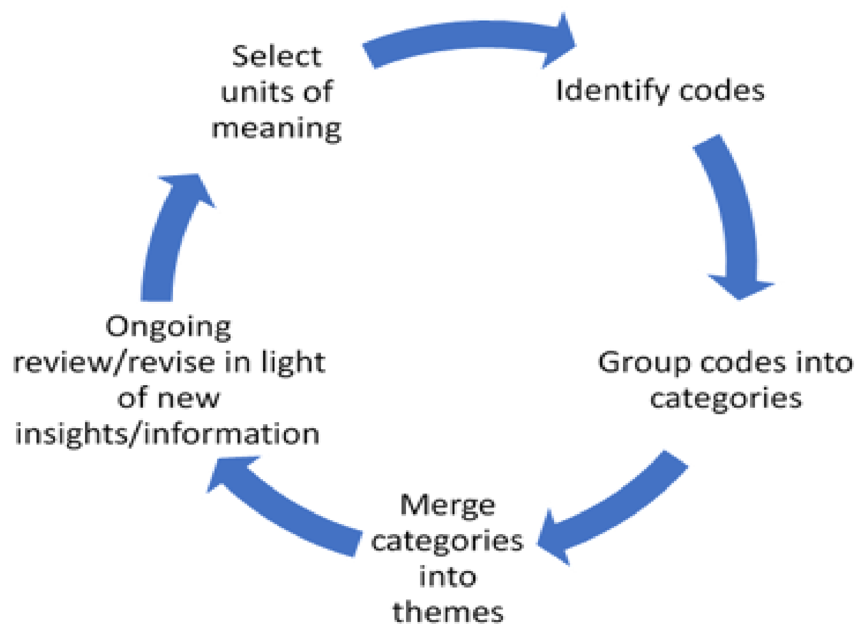
The process for QCA goes beyond merely counting words or extracting manifest or latent content from texts. Rather, the aim is not simply to count the physical characteristics of the text but to understand social reality in a subjective but systematic manner (Prasad, 2019). All stages of research design and data analysis must be guided unwaveringly by the research questions. If the aim of the research is that of exploration and description, then a process that involves developing conclusions from collected data by weaving together new information into theories is required. If the research commences with an inductive approach, as this study did, then the coding frame is developed in the course of the process of familiarisation with the data, but crucially this coding framework may change as the study progresses and more data becomes available (Bengtsson, 2016). If deduction is applied in the initial stages, the researcher creates a coding frame based on their search of the literature and their belief in the value of adopting an initial theoretical stance. Some have argued that coding frames that are developed using deductive means increase credibility and reliability (Catanzano, 1988) but Downe-Wambolt (1992) reminds us that the stability and reliability of study results can be enhanced if coding frames are reviewed and revised over

the course of the research.

### 4.19 Organising the data

Prior to commencing analysis and regardless of the source of the data used, a decision must be made about the unit of analysis, that is the basic unit of text to be classified. The unit of analysis refers to the portion of the content that will be used to form the basis of decisions when deciding on codes (Roller & Lavrakas, 2015). Regardless of which unit of analysis is chosen, it should allow the researcher to retain the context necessary to derive meaning from the data. For this study, the selection of the individual student response as the unit of analysis was most appropriate, as Roller & Lavrakas (2015) advise, to retain the context of the comments and facilitate the backwards and forwards movement between each respondent's quantitative and qualitative data. Figure 5 illustrates the process.

**Figure 5** – Approach to qualitative analysis of comment data




Student comments and relevant demographic data were saved to Excel

spreadsheets to allow for ease of use and reading. The unit of analysis was the individual anonymised student responses to the two final questions in the survey “What does your institution do best to engage you in learning? and “What could your institution do to improve students’ engagement in learning?” At this stage, the data was reviewed to identify respondents who had not submitted answers to either or both questions and these were removed. Doing this allowed me to reduce the size of the files and obviate the need for endless scrolling through the datasets. Initial reading of the data also allowed me to identify a minority of students who had responded with the word “nothing” to the ‘what is best’ question and “everything” to the ‘what could improve’ questions. However, these respondent comments were not removed for both reasons of accuracy and inclusiveness, as all responses needed to be treated equally and with respect. The use of Excel at this initial stage allowed me to filter and sort the data using a variety of commands, all of which allowed me to become familiar with the data and I was able to search for specific words or terms in the complete dataset. While at the start of the research process I was dealing with the 2013 pilot, and the full 2014 and 2015 datasets, over the duration of the research the datasets for years 2016 to 2019 inclusive were also made available to me by the national Project Steering group. This allowed me to analyse each of the first seven years of the survey and to assess if what students say engaged them in learning had changed over the years.

#### 4.19.1 Data reduction

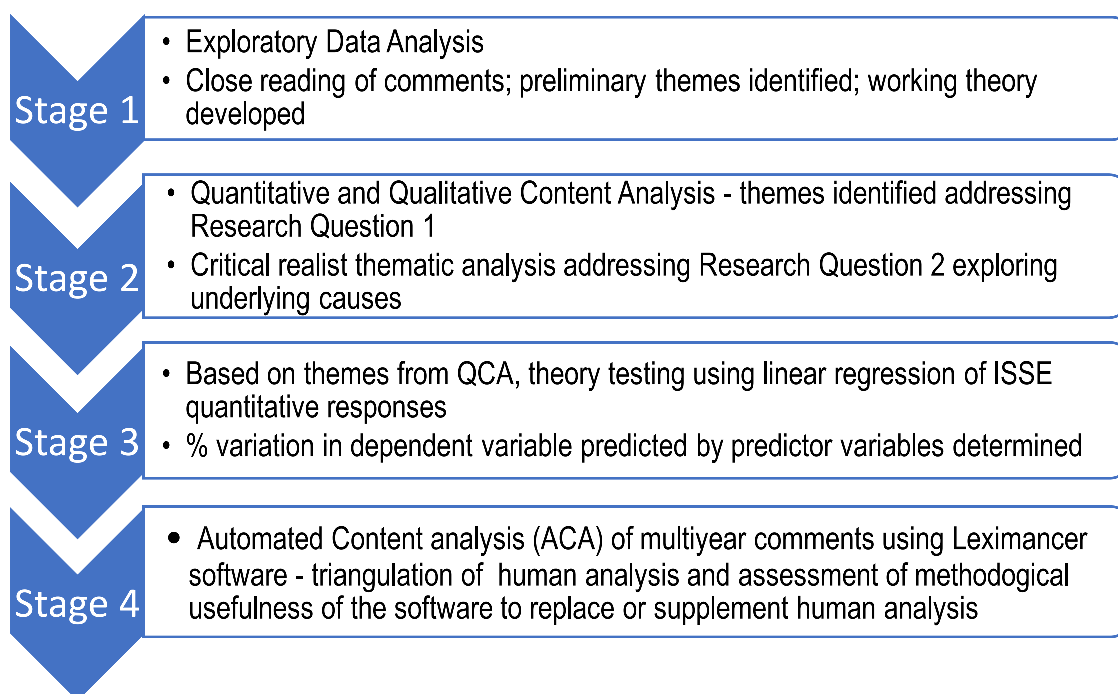
Intensive qualitative studies invariably generate voluminous data which can be a bane or a bonus (O’Cathain & Thomas, 2004) but what is seen as the nuisance aspect of working with voluminous data can be addressed and reduced

through methodological inquiry (Miles, 1979). However, while this study uses the open-ended student comments in the ISSE, the questions eliciting the comments are less general and more directed, a factor that makes their analysis a less cumbersome task. A key feature of QCA is that as a method it reduces the volume of the data, an aspect of the method that was particularly suitable for this study where multiyear large datasets were being analysed. This goal of data reduction forces the researcher to focus on those aspects of the meaning that relate to the overall research question. This is achieved using a coding frame where successive parts of the material are assigned to categories (Schreier, 2013). However, when dealing with open-ended survey data, the 'free list' or 'narrative' nature of the data results in considerable variability in both the length and depth of the data. This can mitigate against any standardisation and reduction of the data when identifying codes.

### 4.20 Systematic analysis

A key feature of QCA is that it is systematic, the method requiring the examination of all parts of the dataset that are relevant to the research. Regardless of the approach to QCA adopted, the process invariably involves a series of steps from question formulation, selection of the sample, designing and applying a process of coding, attending to issues of credibility and trustworthiness, and finally analysing and interpreting the results (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). What follows is a description of the sequence and process of data analysis which I have also captured in Figure 6.

**Figure 6** – Stages of Analysis




### 4.20.1 Familiarisation with preliminary analysis

Stage one: On receipt of the datasets, manual reading of the comments enabled familiarisation with the comment content. This allowed me, based on my reading, to employ abductive reasoning to develop a student-led working definition of SE. Abduction involves developing theories about puzzling phenomena that provide the best explanation based on what we know (Peirce et al., 1998). Abduction reflects a detective's approach to developing initial explanatory hypotheses, unlike deduction which involves making predictions moving from the general to the specific.

### 4.20.2 Content and Thematic Analysis (TA)

Stage two: Content analysis was first employed to quantify the data and this was followed by qualitative analysis of the comments to identify codes. Following Sandelowski's (2000) approach, content analysis (CA) was used to quantify the data, identifying the most frequently used words and terms across

the seven years of data. This confirmed the patterns and regularities that were in part discovered using manual means and were confirmed using numbers. As this stage of the analysis was addressing **Research Question 1** (RQ1), Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) was then used to identify the main themes and topics that students were raising in their free text responses. QCA is data derived and this can be challenging for a researcher who is working with corpus comment data as the process can result in hundreds of codes being generated. The approach taken to the analysis of the data can be a conventional inductive approach or a directed, deductive one (Schreier, 2012). However, what is most important is that the method of analysis chosen is that which offers the greatest potential for answering the research questions. QCA and an inductive approach addressed RQ1 in identifying manifest themes and patterns in the student comments that captured those aspects of their experience that were most conducive to engagement with learning. According to Graneheim et al. (2017), in order to achieve theoretical understanding during the process of induction the researcher identifies differences and similarities in the data which they label as categories and/or themes. This involves a process of reasoning as the researcher moves from the concrete to the specific, the abstract to the general, as theoretical understanding is achieved. As Sandelowski (2000) reminds us, both quantitative and qualitative content analysis involve counting the numbers of students submitting responses in each response category. Crucially, however, in qualitative content analysis, the summarisation of the data numerically is not the end itself but rather a means to an end using what Crabtree & Miller (1992) term ‘quasi-statistical analysis’ (Sandelowski, 2000, p.338).

The qualitative content analysis (QCA) of the datasets enabled capturing of the 'best' and 'could improve' themes, essentially the 'what' of SE in Irish HE. Description must always precede explanation and while describing the 'what' of SE adds to our understanding of the phenomenon, if the aim of the research is to bring about change, then we also need to understand the 'how' and 'why' of SE. This is necessary not only to inform actions that can bring about change but also addresses **Research Question 2** (RQ2):

> In what contexts do students and teachers interact and what is the nature and quality of these interactions?

While RQ1 concerned generally what students considered as most effective in engaging them in their studies, RQ2 was focused on the indicators and facilitators of student-faculty interaction. Thematic analysis (TA) through a critical realist lens was used to answer this question. TA offers a flexible approach to analysis that can be adapted to a study's needs, enabling rich, detailed and complex accounts of data to be captured (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.6). When conducting TA, what counts as a theme, is anything in the data that captures something important that relates to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data. Unlike QCA where the prevalence of the code, or pattern influences its designation as a theme, in TA, the researcher's judgment is required to determine what counts as a theme and flexibility is key (Braun & Clarke, 2006). TA facilitates a more detailed and nuanced account of one particular theme, or group of themes, within data related to a specific question, in this case, RQ2. This might relate to a specific question or area of interest within the data (a semantic approach), or to a particular 'latent' theme across the whole or majority of the data set. (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.11).

In TA, themes can be identified using a data driven 'bottom up' or inductive approach that is similar to the conduct of analysis in GT studies. Alternatively, the researcher can conduct theoretical analysis which is an analyst driven approach whereby coding is often driven by a specific research question as opposed to an inductive approach which often generates the research question for the analyst.

It is important to note "that researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.12). While initially I was interested in finding out generally what students said engaged them, as I delved deeper into the comments, I was prompted to consider how the teaching context facilitated or blocked student active engagement with their studies. TA at this stage of the research allowed for the analysis of the comments at a latent level "to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies – that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.12). The questions guiding this research demand the use of both approaches. QCA addressed RQ1 to identify manifest themes and patterns in the student comments, with TA identifying latent or underlying themes in the data addressing RQ2. In particular, the data was analysed from a critical realist perspective aimed at empowering student voices (Bhaskar, 1998) seeking to identify those causal mechanisms that impact on the phenomenon and identifying actions that can improve people's conditions (Haigh et al., 2019). This allowed me to explore what students perceived to be the structural impediments to their engagement and the influence of institutional policies on students' capacity to engage and exercise personal agency. Drawing on Archer (2003) the student narratives were analysed for evidence of the

generative powers of structural and cultural constraints that objectively impact on student agency. This generated insights into how the institutional, and specifically, teaching and learning contexts, impact on and influence students' capacity to shape their own learning.

### 4.20.3 Testing a theory using linear regression

Stage three: The results of the content and thematic analysis that preceded led me to hypothesise that there is a relationship between teaching contexts, approaches, methods, attitudes and SE. I tested this using simple linear regression in SPSS of the responses to the quantitative survey questions that produce the SE indicators. Linear regression allowed me to test the relationship between composite variables that I constructed from the ISSE SE indicators derived from student reports about how they spend their time (Kuh, 2009). Guided by the results of the content and thematic analysis, the Effective Teaching (ET) Student-Faculty interaction (SFI) indicator questions along with questions that specifically ask about the quality of interactions with academic staff and advisors, were merged to produce an independent predictor variable which I named **Relational Teaching**. A dependent composite variable which I named **Academic Engagement** was also created by merging responses to the questions that address Higher Order Learning, Quantitative Reasoning, Learning Strategies and Reflective and Integrative Learning and Collaborative Learning. To these I added three additional questions that deal specifically with preparing for or participating in class, but the responses to which are not included in an ISSE indicator. . In conducting the linear regression, I was attempted to identify the contexts or circumstances that cause students to engage with learning. However, it would be naïve to claim that this would provide definitive proof of influence of the influence

of relational teaching on academic engagement. Rather, it is important to keep in mind that the regression analysis is based on correlations but that those correlations can be the result of mutual interactions between variables so caution must be exercised when drawing conclusions as these can be influenced by indirect effects between variables. Recognising that both direct and indirect effects can be at work in any causal model of student outcomes is crucial (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991).

#### 4.20.4 Computer assisted QCA

Stage four: As a stated aim of this study is to make a methodological contribution to the task of analysing corpus survey comments, an alternative to exclusively human analysis was sought. Having tested a number of products for their suitability to process large datasets, Leximancer, an automatic content analysis (ACA) software that conducts content analysis using a machine learning technique, was selected and used to analyse the entire corpus of comments in the ISSE datasets 2013–2019. This serves to triangulate the findings of the content and thematic analysis.

Leximancer inductively extracts the concepts, producing a map of concept nodes that is heat-mapped, in that hot colours (red and orange) indicate the most relevant concepts with cooler colours (blue and green) denoting the less relevant. “Concepts identified (in) this manner are unbiased, robust statistical artefacts and are depicted graphically in Leximancer as concept spanning trees” (Thomas, 2018, p.29). Harwood et al., (2015), in a novel approach, used Leximancer to conduct a retrospective comparative analysis which functioned as an independent context free second opinion with which to make improved judgments (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). They cautioned that Leximancer was not a panacea

and that it still requires researcher judgment and sensitivity in interpretation. Nevertheless, it does allow the researcher to make sense of large datasets due to its ability to produce impartial open coded data using an unsupervised process of identifying lexical co-occurrence (Smith & Humphreys, 2006).

The software's capacity for extracting objective, reproducible and reliable concepts and thematic clusters has rendered it a reliable and valid tool for automated content analysis (ACA) across disciplines (Cheng & Edwards, 2019, p.4). Citing Newman et al, (2010), Cheng & Edwards (2019) confirmed that the semantic coherence of Leximancer was superior to that of human interrater correlation, and although similar to manual analysis, it was capable of identifying trends that might normally be overlooked (Nunez-Mir et al., 2016 cited in Cheng & Edwards, 2019). Leximancer has been used in a number of studies – Sotiriadou et al, (2014) in their limited study comparing NVivo and Leximancer found that both were fit for purpose as both increased the overall level of organization of the project and the ability to sort, retrieve and search data. Cretchley et al., (2010) argued that Leximancer's grounded approach enables the analyst to take an exploratory style, allowing concepts to emerge automatically from the text. While a number of studies have employed the Leximancer software, of particular interest was the research alluded to in this chapter, conducted by Zaitseva & Milsom (2014) on behalf of the Higher Education Academy in England. The study used Leximancer to analyse the responses to two open-ended questions contained in the PTES. Citing Penn-Edwards (2010), Zaitseva and Milsom argue that research supports Leximancer's capacity to produce unbiased and reliable methods of reviewing complex textual data and that it offers a clear process of justifying decisions about text selection, thereby facilitating reproducibility of

findings and increasing reliability (Zaitseva & Milsom, 2014, p.11).

### 4.21 Trustworthiness and credibility in qualitative analysis

For qualitative research to be valued, it is imperative that the analysis of data relating to it is rigorous and methodical and demonstrates trustworthiness by recording and disclosing the methods of analysis in sufficient detail to render the process credible (Nowell et al., 2017). One method of demonstrating trustworthiness is member checking or the sharing of results with participants to check for accuracy (Birt et al., 2016). However, when dealing with secondary data, as with this study, this check for reliability is not possible. In addition to member checking, methodological transparency that enables replication is also cited as the 'gold standard' of practice. However, Pratt et al., (2020) argue, applying quantitative logic to qualitative research imposes burdens on researchers that potentially skew research development in favour of quantitative methods, with repercussions for doctoral students and the early careers of emerging scholars (Pratt et al., 2020, p.1). Their paper addressed the 'replication crisis' in management journals arguing that advocates of transparency in qualitative research mistakenly conflate transparency with replication. In doing so, they argue, it misses the point of what qualitative research seeks to accomplish, theory building or elaboration rather than theory testing (Pratt et al., 2020, p.4) They highlight the methodological diversity present in qualitative research, most of which they argue would reject the need for replication or reproduction (Pratt et al., 2020, p.5). The wrinkle in the argument for sharing protocols is that inductive studies necessitate tweaking and honing approaches as the study evolves. Quoting Van Manen (1995, p.133), they argue that qualitative research is a field of a thousand flowers blooming each with its own

epistemology and ontology, and that “Attempts to prune or discard these flowers reflect a naïve view of how social science actually works and have political implications for the future of our field” (Pratt et al., 2020, p.20). How then might a mixed methods study that employs qualitative analysis demonstrate trustworthiness in the data analysis process? One solution is the use of computer aided/assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), (O’Kane, 2020).In this study Leximancer, the automated content analysis software, performed this function.

### 4.22 CAQDAS

QCA also lends itself to the use of CAQDAS software which is particularly useful when dealing with corpus data such as the ISSE dataset. The rigour challenges facing qualitative researchers have mirrored the invention and use of statistical software in quantitative research (Morse et al., 2002), supporting Lincoln & Guba’s (1985) advice to use triangulation as a means of enhancing credibility. The use of automated content analysis software can mitigate the challenge of researcher subjectivity, reducing the time and cost involved in validating the process of analysis (Smith & Humphreys, 2006). Computer assisted qualitative analysis offers several benefits for the researcher, allowing for the creation of an auditable footprint of the progressive dialogue between the researcher and their data (Sinkovics & Alfodi, 2012 in O’Neill, 2013). Also, it forces the researcher to be more explicit and reflective (Bryman & Burgess, 1994; Veal, 2005 in O’Neill 2013), and it serves to increase transparency and new opportunities for data analysis. However, the inability of a computer to interpret meaning in symbols is a criticism levied at the use of such software as ultimately there is a need for the researcher to actually interpret the data. The analysis of

words identifies similarities in the response concepts or actions, but it fails to offer insights about the context of the concepts or the responses as a whole. In addition, this approach is also criticised as the concepts that are chosen for analysis are usually based entirely on the researcher's judgment.

CAQDAS has enabled the semi-automated analysis of a range of data types. The parallel developments in visualisation techniques have enabled sense to be made of relationships within datasets (Angus et al., 2013). In the process of analysis, Leximancer, an automated content analysis (ACA) software was used to analyse all the ISSE datasets 2013–2019.

### 4.23 Integrating methods, assembling the jigsaw

LaDonna et al., 2018, allude to the often-cited criticism of MMR designs, which is the lack of meaningful or true integration of the two data types. This prompted Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) to caution researchers using MMR to ensure that they know exactly why both types of data are needed and, crucially, how they will demonstrate rigour when reporting their procedures in detail. In what was a back-and-forth process between the qualitative and quantitative ISSE data, I attempted to assemble the pieces of the SE jigsaw puzzle. Sherer (2019) argues for adopting a detective like approach when conducting research on phenomena that do not map neatly into extant theory and where there is 'no smoking gun'. Citing Whitney's (1927) argument that good research involves conscious ignorance and active curiosity, the researcher-detective is on the lookout for the many, often infinite, number of puzzles that warrant investigation.

## 4.24 Ethics

Ethical approval (see Appendix B) to use the data for my research purposes was granted by the National Project Committee in November 2015 and subsequent permissions were sought and granted as datasets were added in subsequent years. Each year the combined results of the national survey are published in the form of a report and made available on the ISSE website. In addition to the published report, each participating institution is sent their full dataset for further local analysis. However, I am the only person who has access to the complete national data set, a responsibility that I do not take lightly. The data used in the research is secondary data and although the data is anonymised and has been cleaned centrally to remove any references to named individuals, as a researcher I can identify the institute type and name, discipline and programme names associated with each comment. As part of my ethical approval, I undertook not to identify individual institutions or programmes by name in any publication. Throughout the research process, I was conscious of not de-anonymising institutional data in the process of triangulation. I also undertook to store the data in a password protected file and not to share it with anyone else. From a personal perspective I am conscious of the responsibility that I must represent student views as accurately as possible, ensuring that my approach to the analysis is informed, rigorous and transparent. In this regard, ethical approval was also sought and received for my doctoral supervisors should they wish to access the datasets in the process of their supervision of my work.

## 4.25 Chapter summary

This chapter has described the methodology adopted to answer the research questions. The adoption of CR with a mixed methods concurrent design has been justified. The data source and its features have been outlined, the rationale for the analysis of student comments on a national basis has been reiterated. The stages of the research have been identified and the approach to data analysis described. This chapter has provided the reader with the context in which to consider the findings which follow in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5 – Results

### 5.1 CA – Quantifying the comments

Using Excel spreadsheets descriptive statistics were compiled that captured the basic features of the data. With descriptive statistics the aim is to simply describe the makeup of the data and what the data shows. Table 2 (page 40) presented the total survey responses by year and number of respondents who submitted responses to the open-ended questions. Having manually read through the comments in each dataset, descriptive statistics were generated using Excel and NVivo12. Figure 7 is a word cloud visualisation of the most frequently occurring words in the combined dataset (2013–2019)

**Figure 7** – Word Cloud (NVivo12) of frequently occurring words (2013–2019)

The availability of multiyear datasets allowed me to search for trends in word frequencies across the years and establish if the most frequently occurring words change over time, an indication perhaps of the temporal importance for

students of particular topics or themes. The word frequencies of the 'what is best' and 'what could improve' comments' were analysed separately and the 100 words occurring most frequently in all datasets (2013–2019) were computed. However, only the top ten occurring words in each are presented and colour-coded for clarity in Tables 7 and 8. The colour coding indicates where in the ranking these words appear across the years.

**Table 7** – Top ten 'what is best' frequently occurring words (2013–2019)

| Rank | 2013 | | 2014 | | 2015 | | 2016 | | 2017 | | 2018 | | 2019 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Word | Count | Word | Count | Word | Count | Word | Count | Word | Count | Word | Count | Word | Count |
| 1 | students | 1257 | lecturers | 1821 | students | 2195 | students | 3305 | students | 3863 | students | 3537 | students | 3410 |
| 2 | lecturers | 1130 | students | 1772 | lecturers | 2157 | learning | 2258 | learning | 2607 | learning | 2543 | learning | 2592 |
| 3 | learning | 914 | work | 1276 | work | 1620 | lecturers | 1998 | lecturers | 2345 | lecturers | 2174 | lecturers | 2187 |
| 4 | work | 843 | learning | 1243 | learning | 1604 | work | 1703 | work | 2117 | work | 2107 | work | 2168 |
| 5 | good | 679 | class | 1087 | class | 1318 | class | 1436 | lectures | 1753 | class | 1701 | group | 1727 |
| 6 | class | 644 | good | 1007 | good | 1213 | lectures | 1397 | class | 1621 | lectures | 1588 | class | 1711 |
| 7 | staff | 583 | tutorials | 905 | lectures | 1065 | group | 1097 | group | 1447 | group | 1527 | lectures | 1633 |
| 8 | lectures | 546 | lectures | 845 | staff | 954 | good | 1067 | good | 1324 | tutorials | 1278 | tutorials | 1297 |
| 9 | course | 478 | small | 816 | small | 923 | help | 1061 | help | 1295 | good | 1274 | good | 1281 |
| 10 | student | 449 | group | 790 | practical | 888 | tutorials | 1032 | tutorials | 1249 | help | 1182 | help | 1177 |

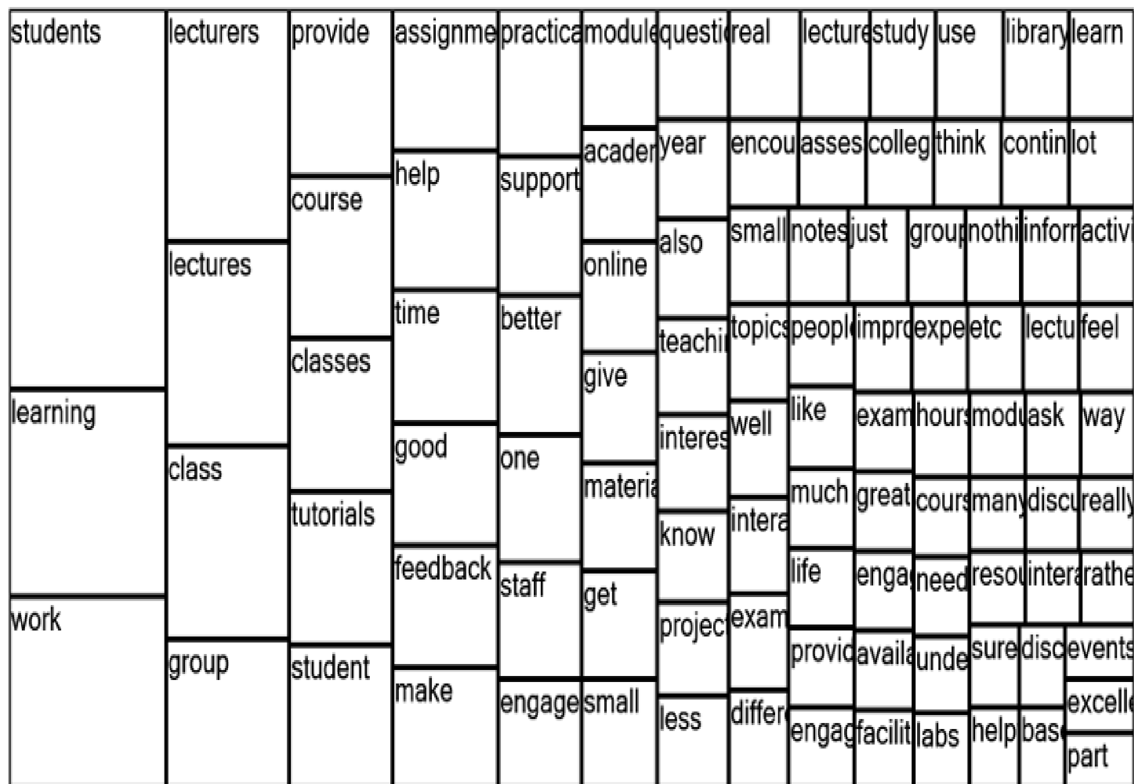
**Table 8** – Top ten ‘what could improve’ frequently occurring words (2013–2019)

| Rank | 2013 | | 2014 | | 2015 | | 2016 | | 2017 | | 2018 | | 2019 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Word | Count | Word | Count | Word | Count | Word | Count | Word | Count | Word | Count | Word | Count |
| 1 | students | 2337 | students | 2866 | students | 3665 | students | 3858 | students | 4463 | students | 4149 | students | 4025 |
| 2 | lecturers | 812 | lecturers | 1115 | lecturers | 1500 | work | 1584 | work | 1883 | work | 1751 | work | 1874 |
| 3 | time | 791 | work | 1093 | work | 1338 | learning | 1441 | lectures | 1760 | lectures | 1670 | lectures | 1690 |
| 4 | work | 787 | better | 951 | time | 1206 | lectures | 1407 | learning | 1693 | learning | 1589 | learning | 1535 |
| 5 | course | 722 | course | 902 | better | 1136 | lecturers | 1401 | lecturers | 1639 | lecturers | 1562 | class | 1523 |
| 6 | student | 710 | time | 899 | course | 1103 | class | 1292 | class | 1501 | class | 1359 | lecturers | 1453 |
| 7 | better | 613 | student | 778 | class | 1060 | course | 1223 | feedback | 1365 | feedback | 1323 | better | 1382 |
| 8 | class | 585 | class | 758 | student | 913 | better | 1126 | better | 1301 | better | 1298 | feedback | 1304 |
| 9 | year | 537 | lectures | 756 | lectures | 860 | time | 1118 | course | 1289 | time | 1275 | time | 1233 |
| 10 | college | 500 | year | 669 | college | 801 | provide | 1008 | time | 1253 | provide | 1232 | provide | 1215 |

In both sets of comments, in the years 2013–2015, the words ‘lecturers’ and ‘students’ shared first and second place respectively, while in the years 2016–2019, ‘students’ occurred most frequently followed then by ‘learning’ in ‘best’ and ‘work in ‘could improve’. ‘Lecturers’ still features high in what institutions do best and this is followed across the years by the frequent recurrence of the word ‘work’. The words ‘class’ and ‘group’ with ‘tutorials’ and ‘small’ also feature frequently. The word ‘good’ in the ‘best’ comments is an indication of the sentiment and while ‘practical’ only features once (2015) in the top ten ‘best’ comments, similar terms such as ‘hands on’ and ‘real world’ feature strongly in the datasets but not in the top ten. In the process of familiarisation with the data, my manual analysis of the comments revealed that those aspects of the institutional environment that students identified as ‘best’ engaging them, were the same things that were most often identified as being absent in the responses regarding where institutions ‘could improve’. The quantification of the data serves

to elucidate this observation further. Producing hierarchy charts and tree maps in NVivo allowed me to visualise the prominent codes in the data as Figure 8 indicates.

**Figure 8** – Tree Map capturing word frequencies (2013–2019)




The tree map shows hierarchical data as a set of nested rectangles of varying sizes, the size representing the volume of coding at each node. The rectangles are scaled to fit the space so are best considered in relation to one another. Much as the word cloud and frequency counts had shown, students, lecturers, learning and work, attracted the most coding references. Exploring the detail of the tree map shows where the words occur in the sentences as Figure 9 demonstrates.

**Figure 9** – Word Tree for 'lecturers' in 'what is best' responses (2019)

Reading across the map shows where the word 'lecturers' occurs in the comments and the context in which the word occurs. Selecting a few examples from the map, we see that comments displayed on the left side of the tree "active classes, discussion in class" or "provide excellent supports" are associated with lecturers, and on the right-hand side lecturers are associated with "care"; "interact with students outside of class time"; "have great relationship with the students" amongst others. The 'what could improve' comments are similar in many respects

to the ‘what is best’ responses with ‘lecturers’, ‘students’, ‘work’ and ‘learning’ all featuring again but this time the sentiment is more negative.

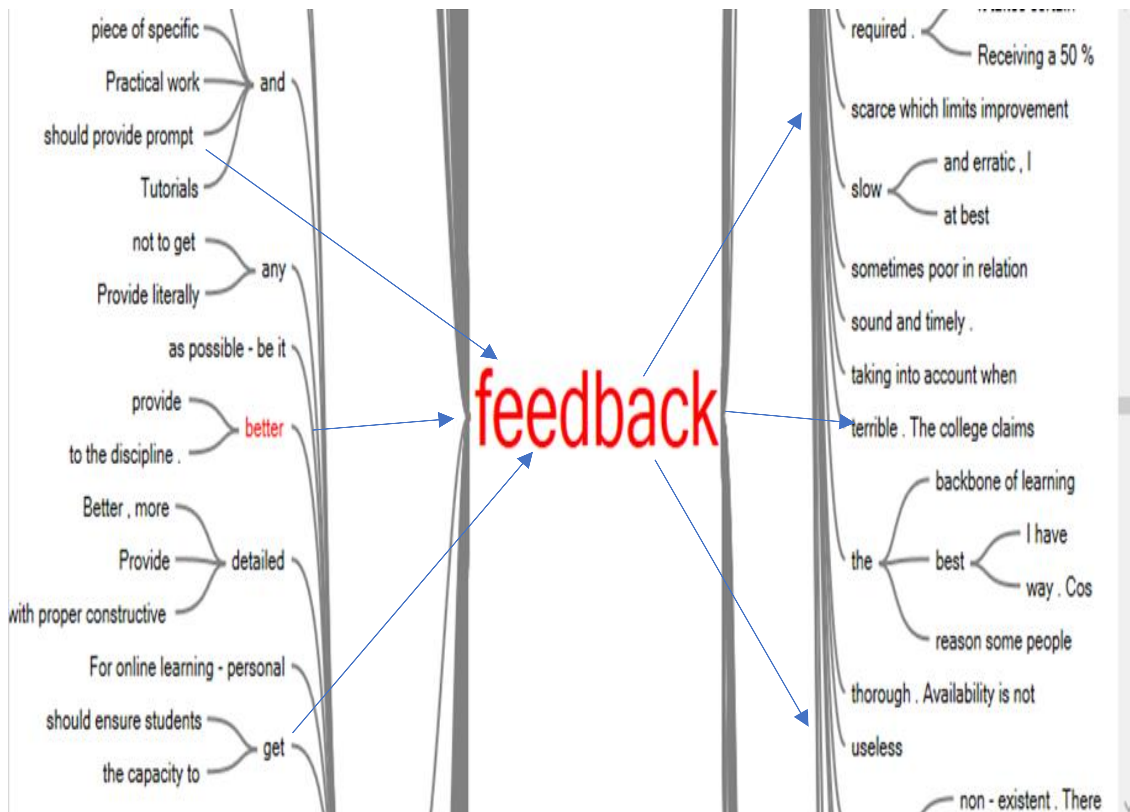
Two words that appear in the top ten ‘could improve’ comments are noteworthy, ‘feedback’ and ‘provide’. Neither appears in the top ten ‘best’ comments but ‘provide’ appears first in 2016 and subsequently in the 2018 and 2019 top ten. ‘Feedback’ first appears in the top ten ‘could improve’ occurring words in 2017. As can be seen from Table 9 below, not only has the frequency of ‘feedback’ increased in the comments across the years, but it also occurs approximately four times as often in the ‘could improve’ comments.

**Table 9** – Comments that mention ‘feedback’ (2013–2019)

| Survey Year | what is best | what could improve |
|---|---|---|
| 2013 | 80 | 302 |
| 2014 | 125 | 417 |
| 2015 | 166 | 523 |
| 2016 | 176 | 886 |
| 2017 | 303 | 1226 |
| 2018 | 318 | 1182 |
| 2019 | 353 | 1201 |

Figure 10 displays a section of the word tree showing where ‘feedback’ occurs in comments.

**Figure 10** – Word Tree for 'feedback' in 'what could improve' responses (2013–2019)



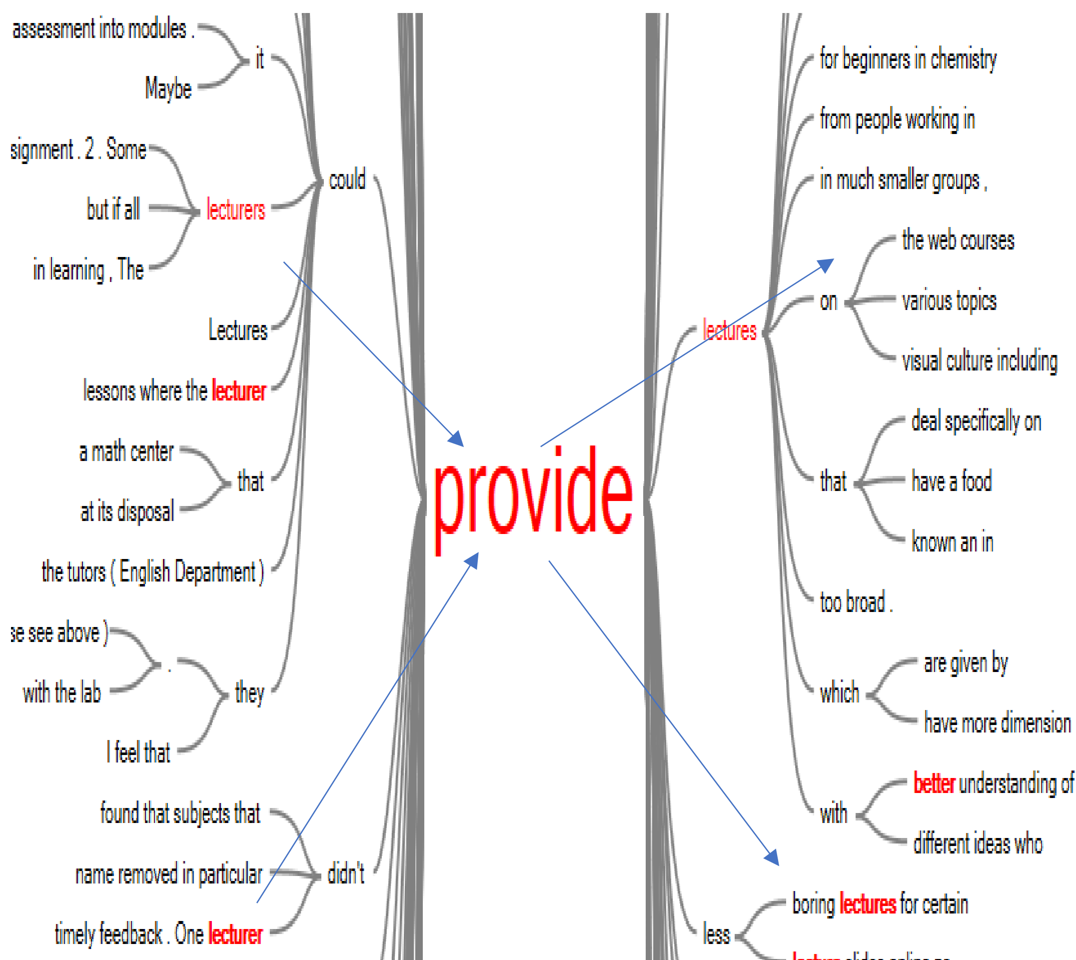

The word tree shows that students seek prompt, better and detailed feedback on their work and the comments below are illustrative of how students speak of feedback in their 'best' and 'could improve' comments.

> "Feedback is always promptly given and very helpful. All lecturers are very approachable" (what is best comment, ISSE,2018)
>
> "Feedback from lecturers needs to improve, the majority of feedback is non-existent, and those who do provide feedback, a high percentage of this is descriptive, rather than critical or constructive" (what could improve comment, ISSE,2018).

As the 'best' comment illustrates, students are appreciative of lecturers that provide and discuss feedback on their work, and correspondingly students' 'could improve' comments seek timely feedback that facilitates improvement in

performance, signposting an aspect of teaching and assessment that needs attention. Another word that is worthy of mention is ‘provide’ as it also occurs in the top ten words in the years 2016, 2018 and 2019. In Figure 11 below, we see that the word ‘provide’ occurs in comments that refer to lecturers and exhort institutions to provide more “timely feedback” and “lectures on web courses” and “less boring lectures”.

**Figure 11** – Word Tree for ‘provide’ in ‘what could improve’ responses (2013–2019)




While word frequencies and word trees provide a good overview of how often and where words occur, examining the key words in context allowed me to impute their meaning. Table 10 shows where the frequently occurring words appear in the ‘best’ and ‘could improve’ comments.

**Table 10** – Key Word in Context (KWIC) comment examples (2013–2019)

| Top ten words | Key words in Context – 'what is best' comments | Key words on Context – 'what could improve' comments |
|---|---|---|
| Students | Showing the students where exactly the topic being studied is used in the real world. | Could be improved by not having as many group projects with students we are placed with - a lot of students are unmotivated and do not attend regularly |
| Lectures | Class tests - project groups - ask questions during lectures - promote learning and studying in groups/in library - promote services | Decrease the number of students in lectures, I currently attend lectures with about 200 students in one hall. |
| Lecturers | A lecturer who is good at their job is one of the best assets to a university to engage students in learning.<br>Captivating lecturers and interesting assignments. | -Lecturers could provide better office hours and encourage students to see them on an individual basis once a semester.<br>-Most of our lecturers were excellent but three of our lectures did not understand the curriculum they were teaching and as such the quality of the classwork suffered. |
| Learning | Active conversations during lectures which allow others to hear about real life experiences which is a good learning opportunity.<br>Blended learning | Having lecturers be prepared and provide feedback whenever possible that isn't vague. It's okay to do bad on an exam or CA but if no feedback is given that the student can analyse and learn from, they will never engage in learning |
| Work | By focusing on the work that students are doing in class, lecturers setting assignments that make the students have to think and evaluate the course material | I think recurring individual feedback, especially in 1st year, would give the student an idea of what is expected from a piece of work |
| Class | Some lecturers ask questions such as solving a problem in class and they give us a minute to try to solve it. This is very engaging and I would love to see it done more often | -Provide catch up classes for people who have been genuinely unable to attend lectures during the week due to personal reasons, illness, etc. |
| Good/ Better | By providing a good student-lecturer relationship.<br>Academic staff are (for the most part) very good at their jobs. | Better guidelines for assignments. Better structure in the allocation of classes on the timetable, e.g. No days with a single class at 5pm |
| Feedback | Accommodating lecturers, healthy open discussion-based classes and good feedback on assignments for the most part | More interaction with student/staff. Not enough feedback provided. |
| Group | A lot of group work and good notes | More group work related activities. Students can learn effectively from their peers as well as lecturers. |
| Small /Tutorial | By showing videos in lectures, not reading off the board and actually explaining the material themselves, putting all the notes on canvas on time and providing tutorials | Even smaller classes. Even more interaction between professors and students during the lectures. More practical simulations.<br>Have smaller lecture theatres so people have a chance to ask lecturers questions in smaller groups. |

## 5.2 Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA)

Content Analysis enabled the quantification of the comments, producing word frequencies which helped to frame the analysis. Although I had manually analysed the comments during the process of familiarisation with the data, following the descriptive statistics phase, I re-read the comments dipping in and out of the data as I followed clues as to what students were telling me. As my initial reading had shown, and the word frequencies and word trees illustrated, many of the student comments concerned students and lecturers and the classroom environment. What followed then was a process of coding, categorisation, and theming. The challenge, however, was reducing the codes to categories and themes as many of the comments were long with diverse references.

At this stage of analysis, singular words, many of which functioned as codes, were being combined and assigned to categories leading to the development of themes. Focusing on selected aspects of meaning, namely those aspects that relate to the overall research question, the process of abstraction provided a sense of how different comments compare and relate to each other (Schreier,2013, p.170). While most of the categories were data-driven, qualitative content analysis typically combines varying portions of concept-driven and data-driven categories within any one coding frame. The balance here rests on recognising my ontological preference for hermeneutic understanding, and the knowledge produced as co-created by the students and me as a researcher. However, it was important at all times to 'let the text talk' and not impute meaning that is not there (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004, p.111). Tables 11 & 11a presents

the coding framework developed during analysis. Themes, codes and categories are presented alongside sample 'best' and 'could improve' comments.

**Table 11** – Codes, Categories and Themes (2013–2019)

| Themes | Codes/ Categories | 'best' comment examples | 'could improve' comment examples |
|---|---|---|---|
| Teaching Context | Small group; tutorials; seminars; laboratories; workshops; One to one | Class size on my course is small – this has allowed good engagement with lecturers, good relationships with staff.<br>Lecturers interact with students on a regular basis due to smaller class numbers which in turn makes it easier for us students to engage in the lecture. | I think more needs to be done in small groups to encourage students to talk and discuss the material they are learning.<br>More tutorials are essential. |
| Teaching Methods | Interactive; discussions; group work; questions; classroom polling; peer instruction; peer collaboration | All lectures are interactive, no matter the subject the student gets to voice their opinion.<br>Smaller tutorials also hep engage quieter students and as a class helps discuss any problems we may have.<br>Lecturers know students by name and interact with them accordingly. | More active methods, hands on, instead of sitting there and just listening and taking notes.<br>Engagement could be improved through lecturers using more interactive teaching methodologies within lectures. |
| Lecturers | Approachable friendly; available; flexible; responsive; caring; helpful; understanding; supportive; knowledgeable; organised; passionate; enthusiastic; Inclusive; relational; encouraging; respectful | Enthusiastic and focused lecturers with wide academic and practical knowledge<br>Lecturers know you by your name, not a number, and build a relationship with you to ensure you succeed beyond your own expectations<br>Lecturers and staff are very open and available to talk on a normal level with students making the experience one of community and as if people really care about you. | Classes are far too passive.<br>More engagement from lecturers to students.<br>Many lecturers simply seem to go through the motions do not give prompt feedback during term on mid semester exams or assignments and can be quite unapproachable. |
| Support | Library; learning Support; Careers; Students' Union; Access Office | Services provided at university (comprehensive library, learning support services, study groups, teaching staff) all contribute to encourage self-directed learning. | Maybe a class or two on academic writing.<br>I feel writing essays isn't my strong point and I dread the thought of doing them. |
| Resources | Flexible; Online; Virtual learning Environment; Library; Learning Support; Study Spaces; Computer labs | Excellent library and online facilities for journals/academic texts.<br>Use of Blackboard by lecturers to share extra information, resources and lecture notes<br>Adult education gives students a chance to earn a living as well as go to college. | Greater use of Moodle for learning resources, note taking in lectures is inefficient and impractical at times.<br>Greater use of online facilities, particularly with regard to the submission of assessments. |

**Table 11a** – Codes, Categories and Themes (2013–2019)

| Themes | Codes/ Categories | 'best' comment examples | 'could improve' comment examples |
|---|---|---|---|
| Assessment | Continuous Assessment; Group Projects. More explicit guidelines. More Continuous Assessment; More group work; More group | Group work, varying assessment tasks, not just written essays, but group tasks such as presentations and performances. | Give us feedback on our assessments, be more organised in allocating supervisors for dissertation, better level of preparation given to students before expecting us to complete assignments. |
| Feedback | More feedback- More detail. More timely. More improvement guidance; More drafts. More time. | Highly approachable and supportive lecturers who encourage and support ideas, give valuable constructive feedback. Lecturers make time for all students on a one-to-one basis continuously providing feedback on assignments and other work completed.<br>Lectures are relatively small which provides the basis for very positive interaction with lecturers. All of my lecturers employ an open-door policy for any queries, suggestions, feedback etc that the students may have. This is crucial. Also, the high degree of group work and individual work that was/is required of me throughout my 4 years here will play a very important part when I do commence work outside of college. | More feedback given on exam and assignment results, we're literally just given a grade and that's it! Often students have no idea why they got they grade they did. It would be nice to know how you got a high grade to repeat that and improve on it possibly and conversely it would be very beneficial to know the reasons for doing badly so you could rectify the issue<br>Some lecturers don't respond to emails, or are very slow to respond |
| Dialogue | More surveys on teaching; More frequent module reviews More response to concerns expressed-more concern for mature students | Interaction and maintaining a constant dialogue with the students.<br>The smaller subject specific lectures that deal with issues relevant to our teaching subject and facilitate dialogue and interaction | There needs to be more dialogue between students and academic staff as in many modules it feels just like being talked at rather than talked to. |
| Communication | Advance Timetables. Advance Book lists; Avoid changes; Communicate lecturer absenteeism. | Good online presence and communication via email and blackboard, also asking students questions in lectures | At present there is a lot of changing timetables and I think this could be better communicated to the students.<br>Some lecturers don't respond to emails, or are very slow to respond |

## 5.3 TA using a critical realist lens

As discussed earlier in the thesis, seeking to explain the low levels of SFI reported in the ISSE prompted **Research Question 2** (RQ2):

> "In what contexts do students and teachers interact and what is the nature and quality of these interactions?"

The comments infer that interaction and interactive teaching are key and function as the glue that links the emotional, behavioural and cognitive aspects of the engagement concept. This makes the search for underlying contextual causes and mechanisms that enable or constrain students' interaction all the more pressing. Looking across the themes that were identified in the QCA, a common thread emerged, that teaching context matters, and in particular the use of large lectures as the primary mode of teaching and how this constrains SE. Institutional cultures and structures that are hierarchal and maintain a distance between faculty and students appear to impact on student agency. Analysing the comments through a critical realist lens starts by accepting that ontology is not reducible to epistemology as human knowledge only captures a small part of a much deeper reality (Fletcher, 2016). Positivist and constructivist approaches are subject to the epistemic fallacy (Bhaskar, 1998) reducing reality to human knowledge either as a container for knowledge or a lens through which reality can be viewed (Fletcher, 2016). Adopting a critical realist approach, the analysis of the comments was researcher and theory driven and guided by a retroductive question that sought to understand what makes interaction possible. Retroduction demands that the researcher move constantly between the *empirical*, and *real* levels of reality, where causal mechanisms act to produce events. The ultimate aim was to understand students' motives and redescribe

them with the aid of existing theory, leading to a new interpretation of reality (Danermark & Ekström, 2019). Hence framed by theory, the codes and categories were derived in large part from participants' words but at all times I was conscious of the fallibility of both the theories and my interpretation of them. Tables 12 & 13 detail the themes drawn from the literature review juxtaposed with student comments. 'Best' and 'could improve' comments are displayed separately. The themes are Institutional Habitus; Engaged/Relational Pedagogy; Paternalism; Mechanisms of Control; The Politics of Listening; and Hierarchical Relationship and Performativity.

**Table 12** – CR themes and 'best' comment examples

| Themes | 'best' comment examples |
|---|---|
| Institutional Habitus | Courses taught by highly competent lecturers while still remaining aware of student's needs and treating students as individuals.<br>Students are treated with respect and encouraged to participate in class. Also, students are treated equally. |
| Engaged/ Relational Pedagogy | Lectures are very friendly and approachable & try to make lectures as interactive as they can. |
| | Most lecturers are very approachable and there is a very interactive environment in which students can voice their opinions or participate in class discussions. |
| | One lecturer we have is amazing, she is interactive and gives ongoing support and encouragement. She also gives timetables in advance and lets us know what we will be doing in the course for example. She doesn't go over time so I don't get frustrated. |
| | Great staff and lecturer that is there to speak with you no matter what the issue, education related or personal. |
| | Lecturers are very willing to answer any questions you have and communicate with students outside of class. |
| | Some of our lecturers are great at getting us engaged because they treat us like adults and talk to us like people, not children. They are also confident in their teaching ability, which makes us pay attention even more so than normal. |
| Paternalism | It's very stimulating when you've had a good lecturer who's not talking down to the student but rather uses language and treats the student as a person who is there to learn. With two particular lecturers it's the complete opposite. I leave thinking what the .... was that all about my confidence level hits the floor. |
| Mechanisms of Control | Most academic staff provide an environment where people can interact in class discussion on whatever the topic is. Many of the classes provide opportunity for student interaction including small group breakout groups. The smaller class size also really helps with regard to learning from each other. |
| | Smaller lecture sizes. This year I am in one smaller class of 30 people and it has transformed my learning and I am really engaging …and this is the first time any staff member at xxx has known my name or ever asked me how I'm finding the course. |
| | Allowing students to participate in discussions and feedback on each module. |
| | Allowing us to use computers in classes. |
| | Allows for our opinions on the best way for us to learn. |
| | Blackboard allows students to prepare for the next lectures, also allows students to follow up with missing notes. |
| The Politics of Listening | They allow students to have a say, by encouraging a class representative to attend a number of board meetings with their department head and lecturers. By listening to students' opinions administration staff and lecturers can get a better sense of what help to create a good learning environment. They also do an evaluation for each subject at the end of each semester. |

**Table 13** – CR themes and 'could improve' comment examples

| **Themes** | **'could improve' comment examples** |
|---|---|
| Institutional Habitus | Improve the teaching abilities of the professors. Most are extremely intelligent … but tend to forget as an undergrad we are on the other side of this scale, that they need to "normalise" their teaching and not assume we already know everything.<br><br>As I am from a disadvantaged background, I have found it difficult to communicate with my peers, to access services and to speak to lecturers (it took me four attempts to even gather the courage to enter the library in the beginning).<br><br>Being a mature student there is a vast wealth of experience and knowledge out there in the classroom. Needs to be recognised and classified academically through discourse with us. |
| Relational Pedagogy | I feel student staff interaction is poor and student are afraid to approach lecturers maybe a coffee morning once a semester for students to see staff as real people would help.<br><br>If lecturers could be a bit more friendly it would help. I've now been here 3 years and only 4 of my lecturers actually know my name without having to read it. |
| Hierarchical Relationships | They have a hierarchical and arrogant approach that alienates students and places extraordinary pressure on them that sometimes impacts on their health and wellbeing. hierarchy need to listen to students |
| Mechanisms of Control/ Performativity | Lecturers should be more engaging - one-way exchange of information is no longer sufficient. Shared notes/ideas for a lecture or class are an effective way of making sure the entire class grasps the subject.<br><br>It seems that many lecturers do not put notes or lecture slides on Blackboard. They do this to penalise those that do not attend lectures, those of us that attend all the time are the ones that really suffer. |
| The Politics of Listening | I speak up often giving my opinion, but it's only the very intellectual students the lecturers know by name and this makes students like me less interested in responding in class.<br><br>I think they should really consider the students opinions in the end of semester evaluations and maybe talk more to students in lectures rather than just a reading from a slide.<br><br>. |
| Paternalism | Make sure all lecturers and staff talk to students like the adults that we are and treat us with the same respect that they expect from us.<br><br>Act less like secondary level education and treat students like adults not teenagers or children. Stop worrying about students being 5 minutes late for class. Things are going on in their lives that are very hard to deal with as a student in college. Life is hard! Give students a break. Be nicer to students. Be more supportive and encouraging and the students will succeed. |

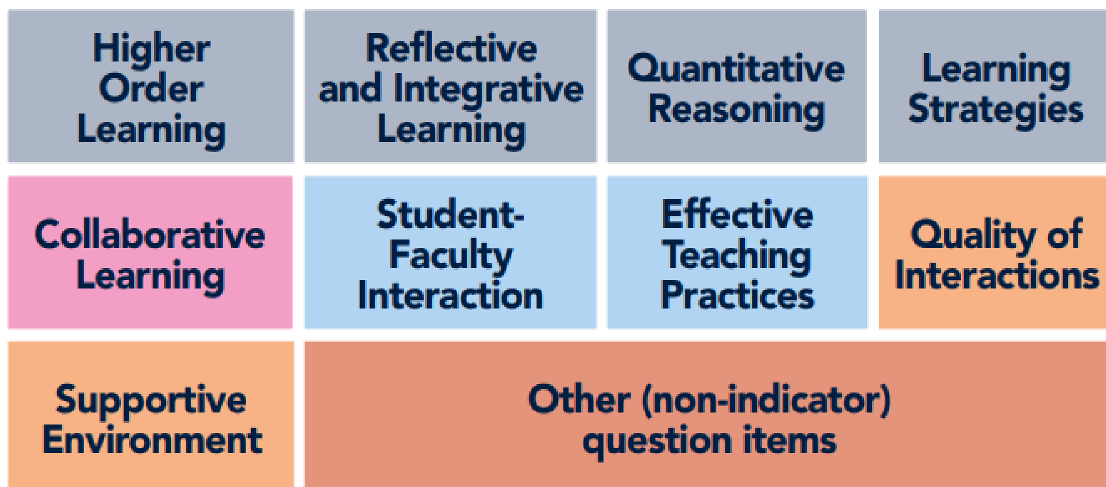
Many of the comments require little interpretation, the words speak for themselves. However, framing within critical realism allowed me to interrogate the inherent properties that act as causal forces to produce consequences at the empirical level. Some of the student comments capture their experience at the

empirical level as the constraining structures that act upon objects or events are invisible to them. Using this comment as an example “I wish that tutorials were more discussion based, and that there were more ways to understand texts/lectures than just reading them, something more interactive”. The students experience at the empirical level is of a tutorial that is a form of small group teaching that is designed to facilitate and encourage discussion of core concepts or themes that students encounter in the large group lectures. Yet at the actual level, the tutorial appears to perhaps be a smaller version of the lecture where discussion is neither facilitated nor encouraged. However, at the real unobservable level lies a decision by the tutor not to use discussion or encourage interaction. The reasons for this cannot be interrogated although other comments exist requesting more relevant, more practical and more interactive tutorials. When the comments are reviewed alongside the themes, they speak for themselves – but the latent element exposed in the theme label reveals the underlying causes, much of which is linked to the rigid systems and structures in HE that serves to maintain a ‘them and us’ hierarchy between students and teachers.

### 5.4 Testing theory using linear regression

Engagement with the literature coupled with familiarisation and manual analysis of the comments led me to develop my student-led definition which theorised SE in Irish HE as predicated on a reciprocal, relational process of teaching and learning. The analysis thus far confirms that students’ engagement is linked to the contexts in which teaching takes place and the methods, approaches, attitudes that teachers and institutions employ to facilitate engagement. Student-faculty interaction is instrumental in building the TSR

(Endo & Harpel, 1982;2009) and is associated with personal social and intellectual outcomes (Kuh & Hu, 2001). When students are satisfied with the quality and frequency of their interaction with faculty, this results in greater commitment to the institution (Strauss & Volkwein, 2004), intellectual development, and gains in first-year persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini,1980). Given that the ISSE is a validated instrument that measures students' engagement with their studies, I returned to the quantitative results to explore if those aspects of their experience that students considered most important for engagement, and that are supported in the literature, are captured or reflected in the quantitative questions and responses. The ISSE engagement indicators presented in Figure 1 are reproduced here.




Having analysed the comments, what was emerging was that, in teaching contexts, it was not one specific approach or intervention that facilitates student engagement: rather it is how teachers employ pedagogical approaches that suit the nature and context of the learning and the needs of the students. I hypothesised that there is a relationship between the methods teachers use, and the nature and quality of their interactions with students, which impacts and/or

predicts student academic engagement. These practices and approaches I identify as the *facilitators* of SE, those aspects of the learning experience that enable student active engagement with their studies (Sinclair et al., 2003). Consequently, I revisited the quantitative survey results that address those questions that deal specifically with teaching and learning in the classroom and teacher-student interactions. Having identified those that reflected what students were saying in their comments and which the literature review had found to influence SE, I then combined the variables in SPSS to produce a composite variable that captures aspects of learning in HE that the literature and comments had signposted as meaningful for students. A composite variable is made up of two or more variables or measures that are highly related to one another conceptually or statistically. When data is normally distributed composite variables which have similar associations when combined, represent an attribute that is meaningful (Song et al., 2017).

The first composite variable combined the questions that produced the five ISSE **indicators** that report on the frequency with which *students* engaged in specific behaviours related to their academic learning. ISSE groups individual questions to produce indicators that enable interpretation of the data at a higher level than individual questions, and to act as signposts to help readers navigate large data sets. As each survey question has between 4 and 8 possible responses, ISSE coverts these to a 60-point scale. To compute the composite outcome variable (**Academic Engagement**), I combined the indicators that produce the Higher Order Learning (HO), Learning Strategies (LS), Quantitative Reasoning (QS), Collaborative Learning (CL) and Reflective and Integrated learning (RI) results. To these I added three questions taken from the survey non-

indicator questions: 22 questions in the survey are not included in the indicators but included for their intrinsic value. These additional questions were chosen based on student ‘best’ comments that referred to being allowed or encouraged to ask questions or speak in class, and ‘could improve’ comments that requested that lecture notes be made available in advance of classes taking place. The questions selected specifically report how often students asked questions or made a presentation in class or come to class unprepared. Table 14 details the questions that make up the Academic Engagement variable.

To construct the *predictor* variable (**Relational Teaching**), I chose those questions that the literature indicates facilitate engagement and that were mentioned in the students’ comments. Students identified as best those teachers that were clear about their assessment criteria, gave feedback on their work, knew students’ names, answered questions during, after class and via email among others. I combined the Effective Teaching (ET) and Student-Faculty interaction (SFI) indicators into one variable which I named Relational Teaching to represent the combination of teaching and interaction behaviours that students report in the ISSE. This variable then represented the influence of teaching methods and the frequency and quality of interactions between students and their academic staff and advisors on SE. Table 15 details the questions that make up the ISSE ET and SFI engagement indicators.

**Table 14 – Academic Engagement composite variable questions**

| **Academic Engagement Variable** | ***During the current academic year how much has your coursework emphasised…*** |
|---|---|
| Higher Order Learning | • Applying facts, theories, or methods to practical problems or new situations<br>• Analysing an idea, experience, or line of reasoning in depth by examining the parts<br>• Evaluating a point of view, decision, or information source<br>• Forming an understanding or new idea from various pieces of information |
| | ***During the current academic year, about how often have you…*** |
| Reflective and Integrative Learning | • Combined ideas from different subjects/modules when completing assignments<br>• Connected your learning to problems or issues in society<br>• Included diverse perspectives (political, religious, racial/ethnic, gender, etc.) in discussions or assignments<br>• Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue |
| Quantitative Reasoning | • Reached conclusions based on your analysis of numerical information (numbers, graphs statistics, etc.)<br>• Used numerical information to examine a real-world problem or issue (unemployment, climate change, public health, etc.)<br>• Evaluated what others have concluded from numerical information |
| Learning Strategies | • Identified key information from recommended reading materials<br>• Reviewed your notes after class<br>• Summarised what you learned in class or from course materials |
| Collaborative Learning | • Asked another student to help you understand course material?<br>• Explained course material to one or more students?<br>• Prepared for exams by discussing or working through course material with other students?<br>• Worked with other students on projects or assignments? |
| Non-indicator questions | ***During the current academic year how often have you:*** |
| | Asked questions or contributed to discussions in class, tutorials, labs or online?<br>Come to class without completing readings?<br>Made a presentation in class or online? |

**Table 15** – Relational Teaching composite variable questions.

| **Relational Teaching Variable** | ***During the current academic year about how often have you…*** |
|---|---|
| Student-Faculty Interaction | • Talked about career plans with academic staff<br>• Worked with academic staff on activities other than coursework (committees, student groups, etc.)<br>• Discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with academic staff outside of class<br>• Discussed your performance with academic staff |
| | ***During the current academic year, to what extent have lecturers/teaching staff…*** |
| Effective Teaching Practices | • Clearly explained course goals and requirements<br>• Taught in an organised way<br>• Used examples or illustrations to explain difficult points<br>• Provided feedback on a draft or work in progress<br>• Provided prompt and detailed feedback on tests or completed assignments |

A simple linear regression was carried out in SPSS on the complete 2016–2019 datasets to investigate whether Relational Teaching could significantly predict participants' engagement behaviours (Academic Engagement). Plots were produced that confirmed a linear relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The ten-step procedure in SPSS was run to ensure all assumptions underpinning simple linear regression were confirmed including residual errors (Appendix D). Table 16 presents the results of the linear regression of the 2016–2019 datasets.

**Table 16** – Linear regression of engagement indicators (2016–2019)

| **Relational Teaching Predictor** | **R** | **R Square** | **Adjusted R Square** | **Standard Error of Estimate** | **Coefficients Unstandardised** | **Std.errorr** | **Beta** | **Sig.** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2019 | .568 | .322 | .322 | 37.76818 | .996 | .008 | .568 | .000 |
| 2018 | .554 | .307 | .307 | 37.72069 | .969 | .008 | .554 | .000 |
| 2017 | .497 | .247 | .247 | 39.16144 | .418 | .004 | .497 | .000 |
| 2016 | .490 | .240 | .240 | 39.17672 | .426 | .005 | .490 | .000 |

Note – the 2013-2015 datasets were excluded from the regression as the quantitative questions changed in 2016.

The Relational Teaching variable statistically significantly predicted Academic Engagement for all years (2016–2019). The adjusted R Square for the 2019 shows that Relational Teaching composite variable accounts for 32% of the variance in the Academic Engagement composite variable. Relational Teaching explains 31% of the variance in Academic Engagement in the 2018 dataset. In both cases, this represents a moderate goodness of fit (Muijs, 2004). The Beta weight for 2019 and 2018 are .568 and .554 respectively indicating that for every standard deviation unit of change in the independent variable (Relational Teaching) the dependent variable (Academic Engagement) will rise by 56.8% of one standard deviation unit in the case of the 2019 data and this figure is 55.4% for the 2018 data. Modest fits for the 2017 and 2016 data are shown in this model with the Relational Teaching predicting 24.7% and 24% of the variation in student Academic Engagement. It is noteworthy here that the effect size increases in later years but this could be due to sample size although this was not investigated here and this is identified as a limitation of this study in the final chapter.

Conducting a simple linear regression on the composite variables confirmed that there is a statistically significant relationship between relational teaching and academic engagement and, based on the four years of data, this may explain up to 32% of the variation in students' Academic Engagement.

However as mentioned in section 4.20.3, it is important emphasise that regression analysis is based on correlations but that those correlations can be the result of mutual interactions between variables and specific causal links from one variable to another cannot usually be assessed from the observed association between the two variables. Consequently, caution must be exercised when drawing conclusions as both direct and indirect effects can be at work in

any causal model of student outcomes and the existence of reverse causality must be considered. Reserve causality considers that the direction of cause may be the opposite of what is assumed: unlike forward causality which looks at the effect of causes, reverse causality looks at the causes of effects (Gelman & Imbens, 2013). Any observed association between two variables may arise by the effect of 'x' on 'y' or on 'y' on 'x' or by the effect of a third variable unknown variable 'z'. There exist then at least two possible interpretations of the causality in the relationship between relational teaching and academic engagement. The first is that it is the influence of relational teaching facilitates student academic engagement: the other interpretation is that reverse causation is at play and that it is student academic engagement that facilitates a teaching approach that is underpinned by a relational pedagogy. Establishing causal order by accounting for reverse causality therefore is a key challenge in many social scientific areas of research (Leszczensky & Wolbring,2019)

While the linear regression model only partially explains the variation in engagement, the model does explain and support the findings of the qualitative analysis that *how* we teach matters to SE in Irish HE. Quantitative methods are one means of truth seeking about SE, but that truth just represents a partial explanation of how teaching and teacher interaction predict engagement. However, to address the question of the low levels of SFI among students in Irish HE required moving beyond the quantitative indicators and seeking answers in the comments themselves. Qualitative and thematic analysis of the comments enabled a fuller understanding of the student experience and the conditions that influence student perceptions of effective teaching and the quality of interactions.

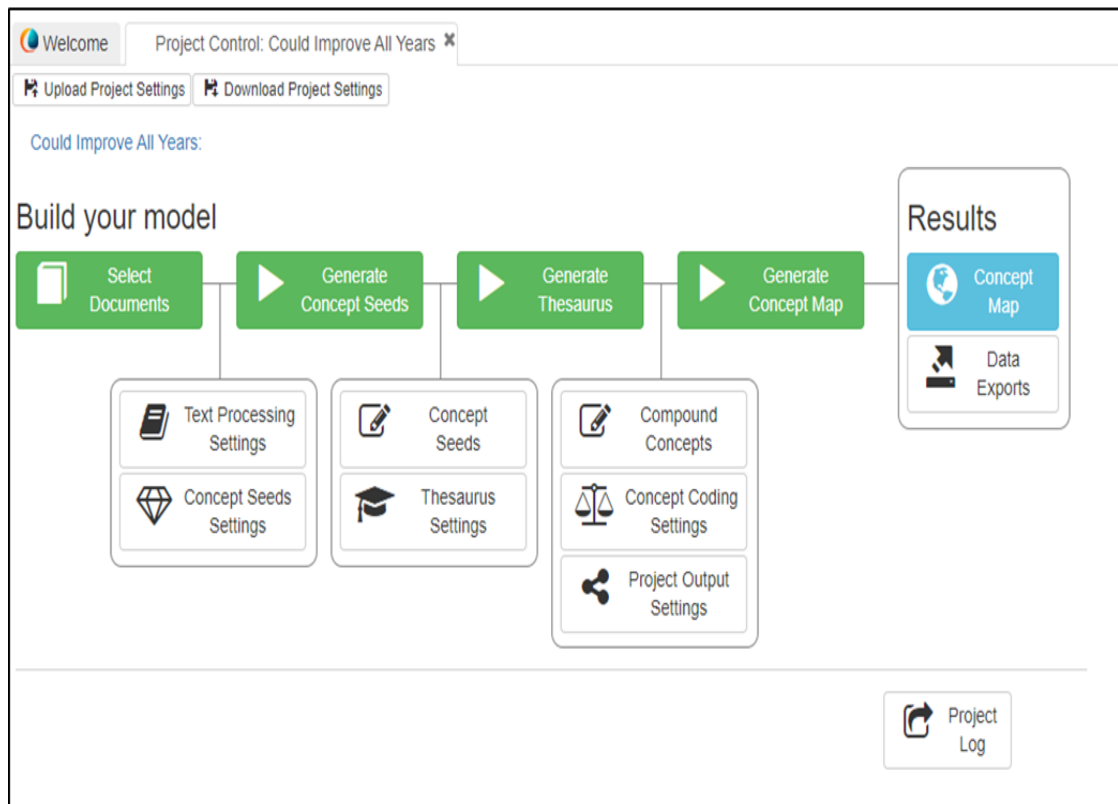
## 5.5 Leximancer automatic content analysis (ACA)

The methodological advantages that automated content analysis offers researchers dealing with corpus text were discussed in chapter 4, Leximancer made the task of identifying words that travel together very easy. The Leximancer analysis proved to be relatively simple to use and the visualisation of concepts in topical and cloud maps aided the presentation of the results.

### 5.5.1 Preparing the data for analysis

Text from spreadsheets can be uploaded to Leximancer directly but these must be saved in CSV format. Data was saved in two separate files for all years – one for 'what is best' and one for 'what could improve' comments. I had used this approach throughout the research as this enabled consistent comparison between years and between the two questions. I checked all the files and cleaned the data removing any comments that just had a symbol or where 'expletive removed' had been added during centralised data cleaning. Once data is uploaded to Leximancer and files selected, the software then takes over and runs the analysis. The process that Leximancer uses is illustrated in Figure 12.

**Figure 12** – Leximancer process for analysing data




**Source:** Leximancer manual, 2018

### 5.5.2 How Leximancer analyses data

As opposed to manual coding, Leximancer automatically identifies concepts and themes, thematically and relationally: thus, it reduces researcher bias, generating stable, reproducible findings (Cretchley et al., 2010; Harwood et al.,2015). Concepts in Leximancer are collections of words that generally travel together throughout the text and these word collections are weighted according to how frequently they occur in sentences containing the concept, compared to how frequently they occur elsewhere (Leximancer manual, 2018). Using two different algorithms, Leximancer simultaneously conducts two forms of analysis: a semantic analysis that draws on the attributes of words, or a collection of words extracted by its own dictionary of terms; and a relational analysis that draws on the frequency of occurrence (Haynes et al., 2019). The algorithms are statistical

but they use machine learning and non-linear dynamics. In doing so, the software develops a list of terms ranked by frequency of occurrence and in relation to each other. Drawing on the context of terms, Leximancer produces a thesaurus of interrelated terms and these form the concepts and ultimately the overarching themes. On completion of this analysis, the software produces a concept map that identifies the main concepts and their relationship to each other. A bar chart of themes is produced alongside the concept map and this allows you to see the relative importance of themes, thus enabling an observer to make sense of the concept map. Ranked concepts are also listed allowing the researcher to see the numbers of comments that are attached to each concept.

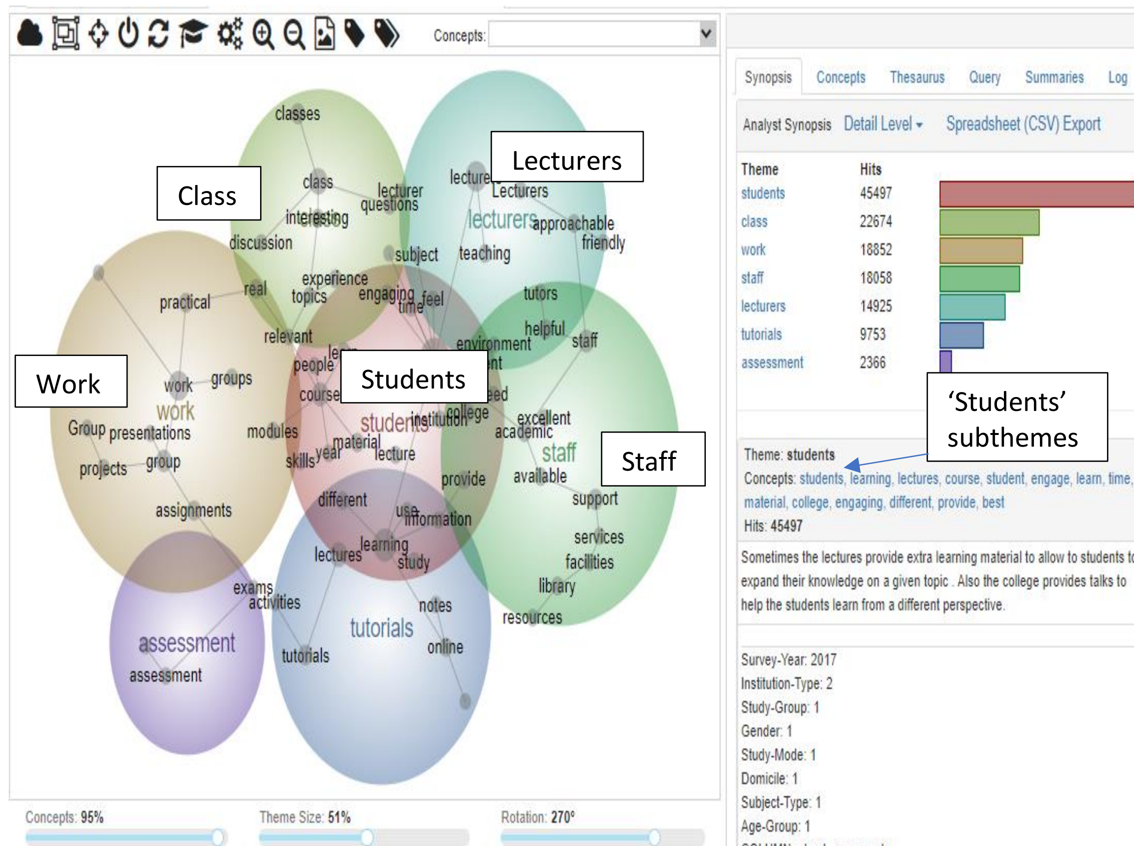
### 5.5.3 Results of the Leximancer analysis

I analysed each year's 'what is best' and 'what could improve' datasets separately to gauge if there were significant differences in the themes/concepts identified by Leximancer. However, much like the descriptive statistics, word frequencies, and thematic analysis had shown, the keywords in context and themes were broadly the same with only subtle differences evident between years. Figure 13 is the heat-mapped concept map for 'what is best' (2013–2019) comments combined. The concept map is both a visual and statistical tool and is the means by which the researcher can interrogate the frequency and relevance of the concepts and themes. The circles represent groups of semantically related concepts(Cretchley et al., 2010). The proximity of concepts to one another signifies a semantic relationship and, when clustered together, indicates their co-occurrence in the student comments. This enables conceptual (thematic) analysis and relational (semantic) analysis (Maramba et al., 2015). The size of a concept dot reflects its connectivity in the concept map, the larger the concept

dot, the more often the concept is coded in the text (Leximancer, 2018).

The software produces a concept map alongside a ranked list of the themes. Figure 13 displays the concept map produced from the analysis of the all years combined 'what is best' comments.

**Figure 13** – 'what is best' concept map (2013–2019)

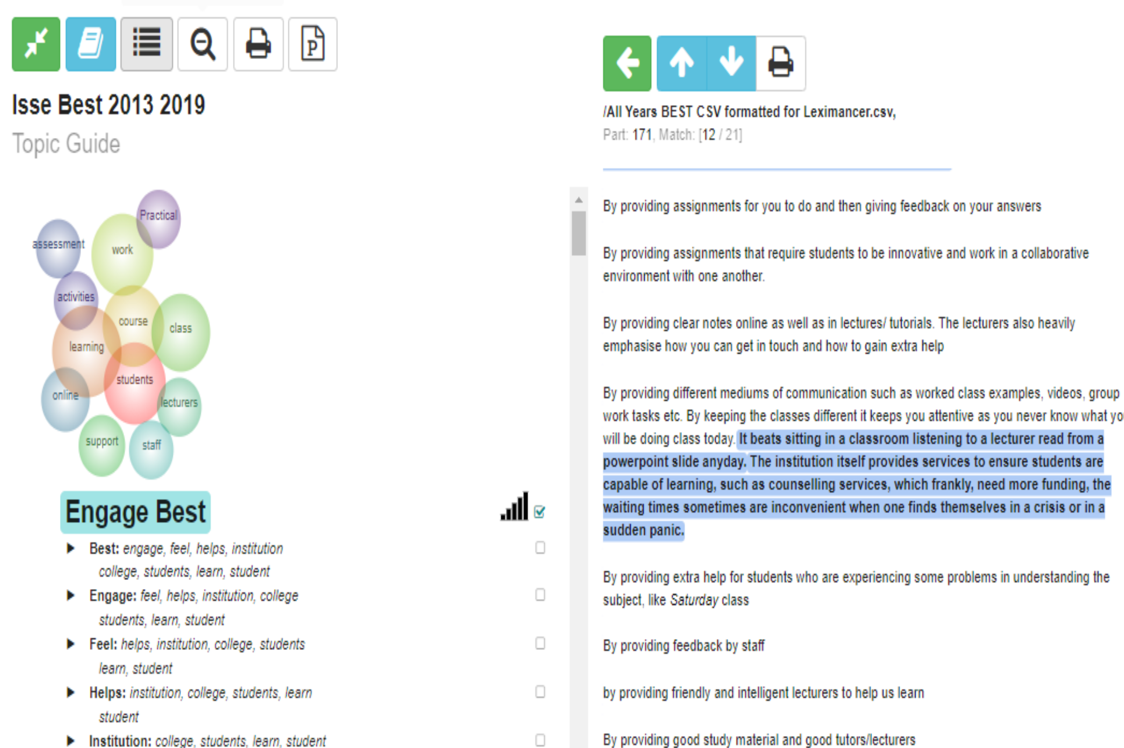



We can see from the heat mapped bubbles and the ranked listing on the side that most important concepts are students, class, work, staff, lecturers, tutorials and assessment (I have added labels for legibility reasons). The theme size can be adjusted along the bottom bar which increases or reduces the number of concepts displayed. As can be seen from Figure13, students and class in that order represent the most important themes, confirming the results of the word frequencies, key words in context, and qualitative CA. The subthemes associated with the 'students' hottest topic are displayed below the ranked concepts and are

students, learning, lectures, course, student, engage, learn, time. The subthemes for each concept are revealed by clicking on each concept bubble. It should be noted here that these results were produced using the system automated analysis and I did not edit out any concepts. I mention this as ‘students’ and ‘student’ appear in the subthemes and these could be merged if the researcher felt it was appropriate to do so.

The software also produces a Topic Guide and presents this in a small concept map providing a global overview of topics. The topic guide displays the results textually and interactively allowing the researcher to explore the important topics in large datasets. Figure 14 captures a segment of the ’what is best’ topic guide.

**Figure 14** – ‘what is best’ topic guide (2013–2019)

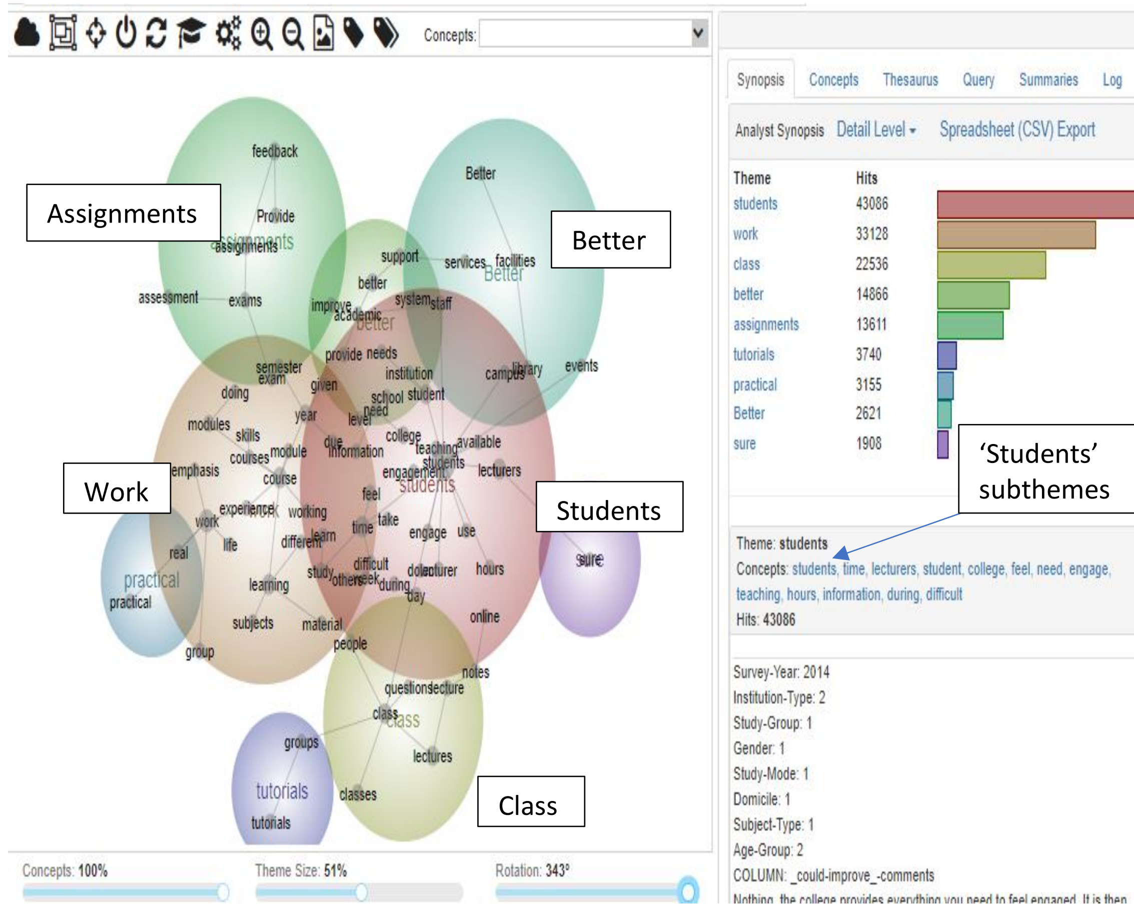



Leximancer employs a two-stage process of information extraction, semantic and relational, using a different algorithm for each. Clicking on each of

the topics identified highlights from whence the theme was generated and, displays the comments that produced the concept. The ‘engage best’ topic is the first in the list here and reflects the ‘what is best’ question that students are asked. That said, the ‘best’ and ‘feel’ words are more reflective of the *affective* side of engagement, the one dimension of engagement that is not measured in the ISSE.

I performed similar analysis on the combined ‘could improve’ datasets the results of which are presented in Figure 15. At a glance, bearing in mind that the size of the concept dot is determined by the frequency with which it appears in the data, the hot topics are students, work, class and better and this aligns with what was found in the content analysis. ‘Assignments’ also feature often in the topics for improvement which reflects the emphasis on assessment and feedback that was highlighted in the qualitative content analysis. Figure 15 shows the concept map alongside the ranked thematic concepts.

**Figure 15** – ‘what could improve’ concept map (2013–2019)

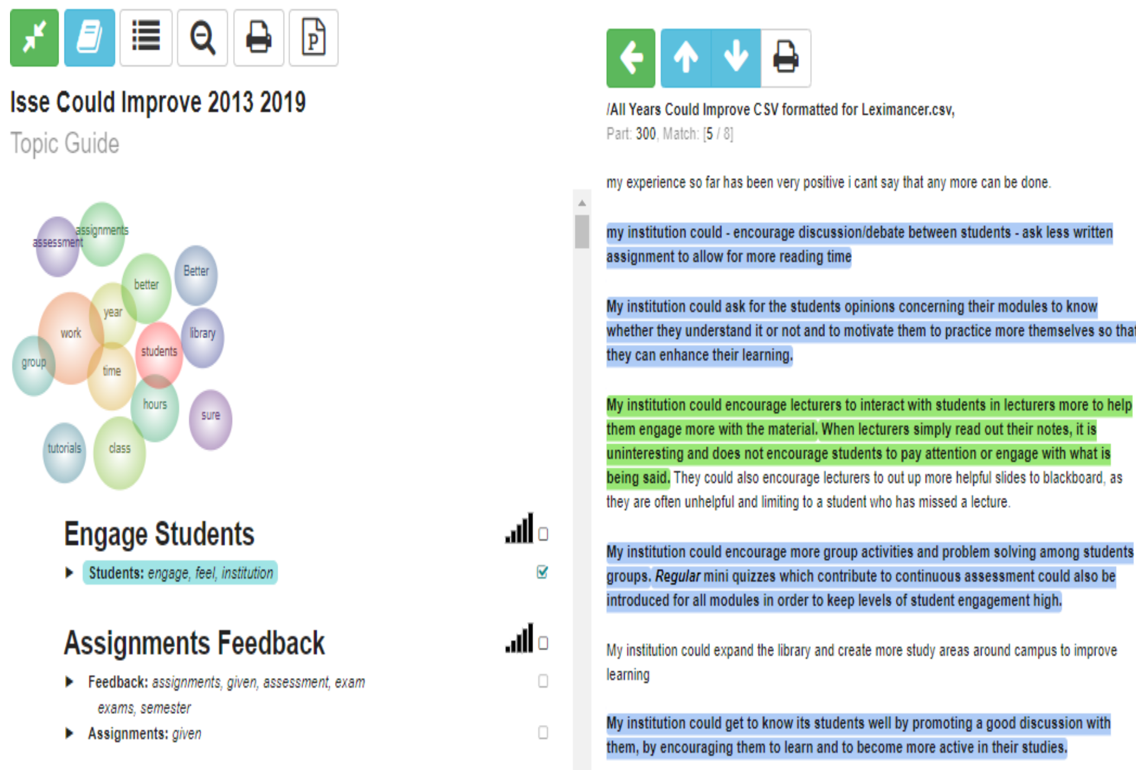



The hottest topics are centred in this map and are Students and Work followed by class, better and assignments (I have added labels on the themes here for legibility reasons). Reflecting what was found in the content analysis students, class, work, assignments all feature as do lecturers, group, staff, tutorials and real.

Students, the largest bubble and also the hottest colour, is associated with the sub themes students, time, lecturers, college, engage, feel, need, engage, teaching, hours, information, during and difficult. Work, which is the next largest bubble, is associated with experience, courses, subjects, modules, semester and exams to mention some and as can be seen in the concept map is closely related to the ‘practical’ theme reflecting the importance for students of hands-on practical application of learning. While this had been identified in the word

frequencies in stage 1 of the analysis, Figure 16 shows an excerpt from the topic guide that focuses on the 'engage' and 'assignments, feedback' themes, both of which were also identified in the qualitative content analysis.

**Figure 16** – 'what could improve' topic guide (2013–2019)




Clicking on specific topics takes the researcher to the linked comments making the task of identifying the themes and keys words in context more amenable. Here again the comments identified with the engage students and assignments/feedback themes highlight the importance for students of interaction with their lecturers, promoting discussion and getting to know their students.

Across the two combined datasets, Leximancer successfully identified the most frequently occurring manifest themes and key words in context. In particular, the concept map produced visualisations of how the themes were connected, something that normally could only be captured using human analysis and interpretation of individual comments. However, the limitations of the software

should also be recognised, in particular the risk that some themes can emerge strongly if represented by a narrow vocabulary highlighting the importance of researcher interpretation of the themes.

## 5.6 Comparing Leximancer's ACA to QCA

Leximancer's value lies in the ease with which comments can be uploaded, processed and then presented visually in ways that any lay person can interpret. Its unsupervised method of semantic and relational analysis provides an unbiased method for reviewing complex datasets and can act to triangulate human coding. Useful as a QCA tool, it can inform not replace the researcher (Haynes et al., 2019) and may benefit from being combined with traditional thematic analysis or content analysis (Zaitseva & Milsom, 2014), an approach adopted in this study. The advantages Leximancer offers lie in the ease with which it can be used requiring minimal self-directed training, but also in its visualisation functionality allowing for the semantic analysis of corpus data in a reasonable period of time. As mentioned earlier, the visualisation prompts the researcher to reflect not only on the themes but how they are connected in the comments, highlighting perhaps its value as an unbiased method of interpretation. The software can be used productively to cross check the completeness of human analysis but it is not a substitute for the hard labour of data coding and theory development (Harwood et al., 2015). In this case it was used after the human analysis and one wonders how the results may have differed if the software were used in advance of the human analysis. That said, when more nuanced understandings of phenomena are called for, such as was required to address Research Question 2, researcher input to both check and interpret the results would still be required. This research illustrated the value of

using technology to enhance credibility. Employing multiple tools for analysis, enhances the trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the inferences made in the qualitative analysis (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

### 5.7 Chapter summary – drawing the evidence together

The research stages to date, have addressed the 'what' and the 'why' of student engagement in Irish HE. The evidence points to the importance of the methods and approaches to teaching and learning and the context in which it takes place. The detailed and rigorous four stage process of analysis has produced a clear set of themes and concepts that comprise Irish HE students' perception of the most engaging aspects of their experiences. Manual analysis of the corpus data informed the student-led definition of SE that guided the study. Quantification of the comments produced the descriptive statistics that drew the outline for the detailed qualitative analysis that followed. The picture that emerged was one of engagement as linked to the classroom, laboratories and tutorial rooms where teachers demonstrated subject passion and expertise and affective and respectful concern for their students. Key to the facilitation of SE were pedagogies that were collaborative and inclusive and respected students as co-creators of learning and teaching (Bovill, 2020). A critical realist thematic analysis of the comments revealed the latent themes that answered Research Question 2 with particular emphasis on the influence of structure and agency on SE. The results of the first two stages led me to theorise that student engagement behaviours as measured in the ISSE quantitative indicators are dependent on effective teaching and student faculty interaction and also the quality of interactions and perceptions of support in the wider institute. Conducting a simple

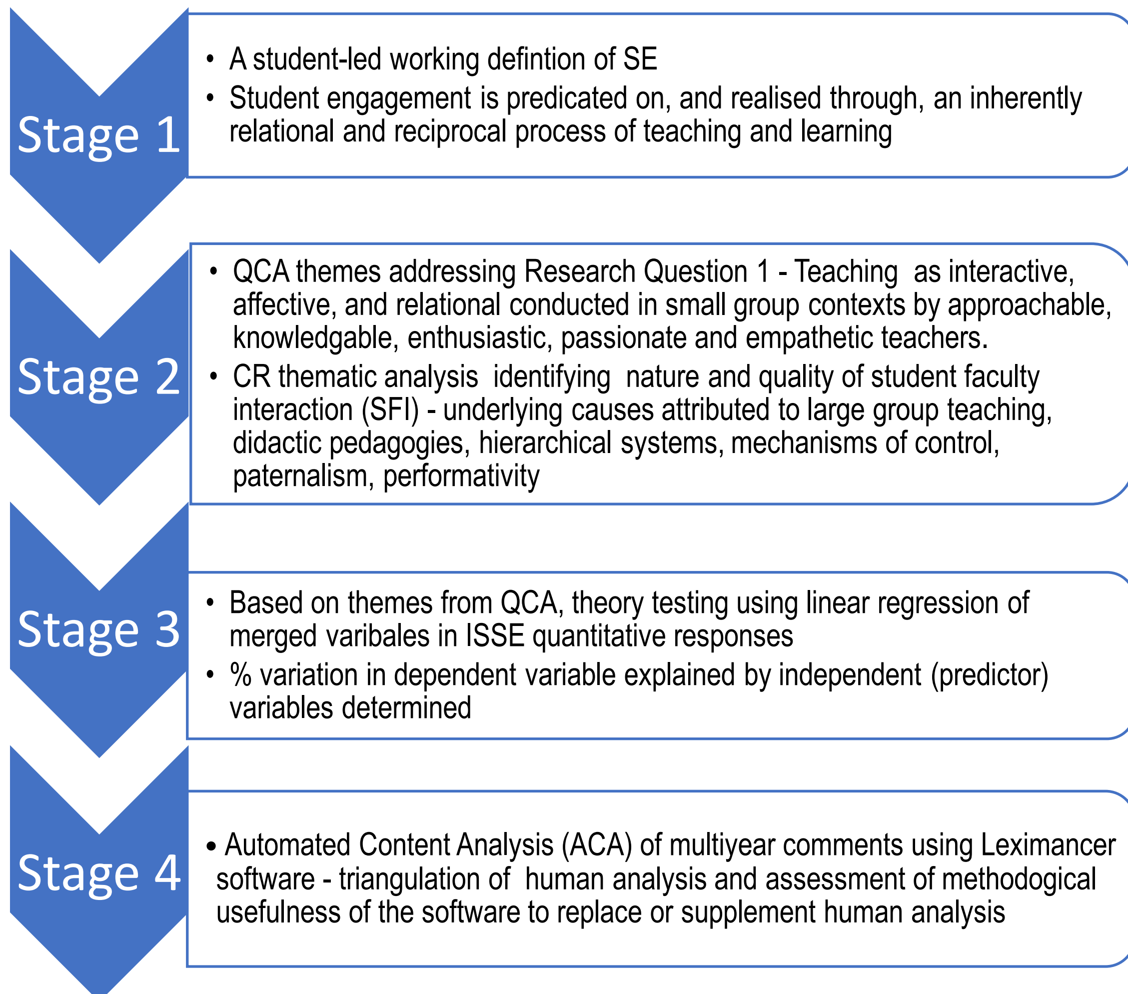
linear regression on the composite variables confirmed that there is a statistically significant relationship between relational teaching and academic challenge and, based on the four years of data, this can explain up to 32% of the variation in students' Academic Engagement.

Addressing the study's aim of making a methodological contribution to the analysis of corpus comment data, automated content analysis (ACA) software enabled the triangulation of findings from the content analysis but also the assessment of the software's suitability to replace or supplement human analysis of comment data. Leximancer proved to be a very useable and useful software for producing themes in data. Theoretically, it could independently address the first research question around what students in Irish HE consider to be most important for their engagement due to its ability to extract semantic and relational themes. The visualisation of the data in concepts maps and connecting lines and dots was particularly useful and as is its unbiased machine learning approach. However, Leximancer would have limited value in addressing Research Question 2 where a more nuanced understanding of the manifest and latent content was required. Prolonged engagement with the comments and human reflection and critical analysis were essential to uncover the underlying causes implicit in the student narratives. It provided causal explanations for variations in SE and signposted where changes could be made to address the issues that students are raising in their feedback.

**Chapter 6 – Discussion of results of study**

Chapter 5 detailed the results produced in each stage of the analysis of the ISSE survey data. Figure 17 reproduces the stages of analysis figure and summarises the results of each stage.

**Figure 17** – Results of data analysis




## 6.1 Engagement is relational

> Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts – meaning

> heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self (Palmer, 1998, p. 11)

The above quotation from Palmer was chosen for its suitability in capturing the essence of what matters most to students in Irish HE. For these students, engagement happens or is activated in the classrooms where learning happens, lectures, tutorials, laboratories and workshops. Although classrooms are complex social systems and teacher-student relationships and interactions are also complex, the nature and quality of interactions between Irish HE students and their teachers are fundamental to understanding what prompts students to actively engage in their studies. This thesis started with my student-led working definition of engagement, which now in light of the results is confirmed.

> SE is predicated on, and realised through, an inherently relational and reciprocal process of teaching and learning.

Despite the literature review confirming that the SE phenomenon eludes an agreed definition, and that there exists no one size fits all approach to SE (Zepke, 2014; 2015; Quaye et al., 2019; Trowler, 2010): the extensive analysis of the ISSE student comments provides evidence that most students in Irish HE, to borrow a cliché, are singing from the same hymnbook. The consistency with which students across institutions and years agree on the 'what is best' about their HE experience, is evidence that above all it is teachers and teaching that matters most for their engagement. Indeed, the analysis of the student comments could be reframed as student perceptions of excellent teaching in HE, so similar are the results to those of extant literature. While Irish HE student conceptions of excellent teaching as captured in the comments are not new, what is new is that

for students in Irish HE, SE and excellent teaching are intertwined and inextricably linked to the teacher-student relationship. While this is evident in the 'best' comments, it is the absence of these that constitute the majority of 'could improve' comments. Mirroring Palmer's description of what good teachers do, weaving a connection between themselves, students, and subjects, students reciprocally strive to interact and connect with their teachers. This in turn enhances the teacher-student relationship, pivotal to their engagement and success. Many students singled out for mention lecturers whose pedagogical approaches enabled interactions, reciprocity and connectedness, allowing for the development of meaningful relationships that were important to them (Pianta et al., 2012). Conversely, many of the 'could improve' comments described pedagogical approaches that were devoid of emotional, personal, and motivational properties that engage students in the task in hand (Pianta et al., 2012). Students bemoaned the lack of connection or relationship with teachers, which they often attributed to the absence or lack of interaction between faculty and students. "Teacher-student relationships, like all human relationships in groups, are reciprocal. This fact, however, has somehow escaped many educational researchers and practitioners" (Schlecty & Atwood,1977, p.285). As the student comments reveal, it appears however, that despite their best efforts and desire for more authentic connections, many students can feel alienated in their learning environments (Gravett & Winstone, 2020).

## 6.2 The relationships that matter most to students

Quinlan observes that in the current marketised climate in HE where the focus is on measuring learning outcomes and gains, discussions about intangibles such as emotions and relationships are often side-lined (Quinlan,

2016, p.108). She notes that the revised version (Anderson & Krathwohl,2001) of Bloom's taxonomy (1956) de-emphasises the affective domain and emotions are still largely absent from mainstream texts and in programmes that prepare academics to teach in HE (Quinlan, 2016, p.101). In her review of the literature, Quinlan noted that what research existed views emotions and their role in HE differently. The psychological perspective views emotions as private, internal to individuals, and often in need of management or regulation. Transformative learning theories also view emotions in learning as personal constructs (Quinlan, 2016, pp.101-102). This emphasis on students' personal responsibility for regulating their emotions chimes with current HE discourses of student-centeredness and learner autonomy that support a culture of self-directed learning (Ashwin, 2006; 2020). Such discourses do not flourish in a vacuum, rather they exist in an intellectual or ideological climate that advances its influence. That ideological climate is, according to Zepke (2015), neoliberalism.

Quinlan (2016) notes that the role of emotions in learning and teaching has largely been neglected in educational literature, particularly in higher education: this despite the evidence that emotions matter in college teaching and learning as an aspect of enriching social and relational experiences that support student development. Her research, following Zembylas's (2012), employed a sociological lens that frames emotions as relational rather than personal. This study responds to Zembylas's (2012) call for more research on relational aspects of emotions and employs Quinlan's (2016) four key HE relationships as a framework to discuss the results of my study. Those relationships that Quinlan highlights are between students with subject matter, students with teachers, students with other students, and students with their developing selves. The

results of the study framed in this way, and viewed through a critical realist lens, help to identify and explain the contextual conditions and teacher competences, attitudes, and traits that allow students to connect to their studies and institutions.

### 6.2.1 Students engaging with subject matter

Students' relationship to their discipline and subject is one of the essential relationships that they form in HE. When teachers are passionate about their subject, learning is experienced as exhilarating, exciting, and fun (Neumann, 2009 in Quinlan, 2016, p.102). When students can see the relevance of what they are learning, this helps them to learn and when they can relate a subject to their own experiences or goals, this connection increases motivation, curiosity, and enthusiasm and this in turn can develop students' passion for the subject matter (Quinlan, 2016, p.102). However, students' perceptions of teacher's passion for the subject can also be bound up with their assessment of teacher interest, knowledge, and expertise in the area with some comments complaining that teachers or tutors appeared to lack subject knowledge or teaching experience. That lecturers may not have a background in the subject is not unusual as staff in HE often find themselves teaching outside of their subject expertise. Regardless of a teacher's experience, teaching outside one's subject area can be challenging as faculty lack structured knowledge, rendering them unable to process information quickly, answer questions, or solve problems in the classroom (Zaid et al., 2020, p.1). Furthermore, while Zaid et al. found that faculty appreciate the opportunity to teach as a content novice, they refuse to appear as such in front of their students, resulting in them over-preparing for class and shouldering the entire burden of transmitting knowledge to students (Zaid et al., 2020, p.10).

A content-centred teaching approach, coupled with an inability or unwillingness to answer student questions, was highlighted in the many comments that discussed the overuse of PowerPoint in lectures, or tutorials that are run by postgraduate students. Students also identified the need for the learning institute to ensure that teachers and tutors were qualified to teach as this comment indicates: “Have qualified teachers teaching the classes, instead of random people working towards their own qualifications” (could improve comment, ISSE, 2016).

While students may question lecturers’ qualifications to teach, this may be coloured by their expectations of the demands of HE. Students may come to college with unrealistically high expectations of their own levels of achievement and the university’s level of service, or they may come with narrow or low expectations of what they can achieve and what the college can offer. Crisp et al. (2009), in their survey of first year students in a research-intensive Australian university, found surprising data that caused concern among lecturers. Students held expectations of receiving personalised feedback on drafts of work that would be received within a week; and that students would have ‘ready’ access to staff for consultations (Crisp et al., 2009, p.23). The Crisp study observed that meeting these needs would have considerable resource ramifications. Irish students express similar expectations but they are perhaps not unreasonable as the ISSE survey Effective Teaching quantitative indicator specifically asks students how often teachers provided feedback on a draft or work. In the same vein, some may question if student disappointment at teacher availability and support may relate to student preparedness for the level of self-directed learning (SDL) that HE study demands. In the literature review, I looked at the influence of habitus and a lack

of cultural capital on students' ability to integrate into college. Whether student expectations are unrealistic or institutions are negligent in their duty of care of students matters as Grow (1991) notes, that where there is a mismatch between student expectations and teaching approaches, learning will suffer.

### 6.2.2 Students with their peers

Peer interaction and peer teaching help students to make sense of their learning in college (Kuh & Hu, 2003; Lundberg, 2003; 2012). Peers provide academic but also emotional support for students particularly when students are linked through their interests or circumstances as these ISSE 2018 'best' comments illustrate. "Group work teaches students how to work together which will be needed in the future" and "Studying with people who have the same commitments as I have, e.g., working full time, have family to take care of etc".

The literature confirms the importance of students having a network of peers whose support eases the transition to college and, for some, makes continued attendance possible (Kahu, 2014;Tinto & Russo, 1994, p.24). The last student comment above illustrates how peer support helps students who have family commitments, to manage their studies, as their commuter status means that they do not benefit from the opportunities to be very involved in activities that residential campuses offer (Kuh et al.,1991). A significant cohort of students in Irish HE commute to college and for these students the HE experience is very different from their peers who leave home to go to college and enjoy the benefits of a residential HE experience (Gormley, 2016; Dwyer, 2017).

Commuter students are often not categorised as 'non-traditional' yet these students often experience intersectional disadvantage (Pokorny et al., 2017), where multiple factors impact a student's opportunity to actively engage. The

question of ‘involving institutions’ or students being ‘involved’ (Astin, 1993) is very relevant for these and other cohorts who do not fit neatly into the profile of the traditional HE student. This is unpacked more fully in the next section and in the conclusions.

### 6.2.3 Students’ relationship with self

HE should interrupt, reconstruct, and transform human beliefs (Mezirow, 2000; Brookfield, 2001) so that our meaning perspectives are more inclusive, critically reflective, differentiating, and integrative of experience (Mezirow, 1991, p.14). Mezirow emphasises the personal emancipatory aspects of perspective transformation in ‘everyday life’ (Mezirow, 1978). Schooling can be a site where emancipation, justice, and equality can be realised if critical pedagogies are employed. In this way, dialogue embodies a practice of freedom (Freire, 2005, p.80) which allows teachers and learners to become “simultaneously teachers and students” (Freire, 2005, p.72).

### 6.2.4 Students with their teachers

The analysis of the student comments revealed that Engagement is located primarily in the classroom, tutorial rooms, and laboratories where teaching and learning happens and where the relationships begin. Positive engagement experiences are facilitated by teaching staff that are approachable, available, friendly, understanding, and supportive, while the absence of these serves to alienate students and generate negative emotions. These findings were confirmed in the content analysis and Leximancer results and supports the findings of literature explored in the review. However, they also support the findings of Ireland’s National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and

Learning in Higher Education (2019), a study that was not included in the original literature review as its focus was not on SE but rather on excellent teachers. This study analysed the perceptions of some 4,000 students in Irish HE regarding the characteristics, behaviours, and skills associated with exceptional teachers. Results revealed that exceptional teachers were approachable, passionate, entertaining, interesting, supportive, kind, caring, generous with their time, and willing to go above and beyond what was needed (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2019, p.iii). A prevalent theme in the comments was the emotional importance for students of meaningful teacher-student relationships. This confirms Kahu's (2103; 2014) and Hagenauer and Volet's (2014) findings on the affective emotional aspects of teaching and learning. Also, support for this study's results is found in another Irish HE study on excellent teaching. Moore & Kuol (2007) found that for students in Irish HE excellent teaching concerns "matters of the heart' (2007, p.87), those emotional dimensions of the students' educational experience. Emotions are recognised as important antecedents to students' learning and achievement (Glaeser-Zikuda et al., 2013; Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014) with teacher emotions being associated with HE teaching that is student-centred (Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2011; Trigwell, 2012).

Relationships between students and teachers are important in creating classroom atmospheres of trust and cooperation requiring both emotional awareness and labour on the part of teachers: in this way teachers are able to observe and interpret students' emotions, and to cope with students' feelings as they are expressed, all of which are important though rarely acknowledged aspects of teaching (Quinlan, 2016, p.105). However, as Quinlan (2016)

observes, teaching can be governed by tacit rules that determine when it is appropriate to display emotion and despite evidence that interest is growing, the role of emotions in learning and teaching has largely been neglected in the HE literature (Beard et al., 2007; Quinlan, 2016). Unsurprisingly then, when engagement is presented as consisting of behavioural, cognitive, and emotional dimensions (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), behavioural engagement is foregrounded, with emotional engagement attracting the least attention (Fredricks et al., 2004).

While many variables influence students' academic success, student emotions impact on their disengagement, failure and withdrawal (Skinner et al., 2008). Yet none of the ISSE or the AUSSE (on which ISSE is based) quantitative questions (Appendix A) which produce the engagement indicators refer to student emotional/affective engagement. This is all the more surprising when the AUSSE survey is designed to provide "information on learning processes, is a reliable proxy for learning outcomes, and provides excellent diagnostic measures for learning enhancement activities" (Coates, 2008).

The lack of attention to affective learning (McCroskey, 2002) is concerning given its influence on students' attitudes, beliefs, and values towards particular content (Titsworth, 2001). Beard et al.,(2007) reject HE's tendency to work with theories of pedagogy and a model of the student that downgrades the affective dimensions of learning. They draw on Mortiboys (2002) who argues that it would be disturbing if universities were emotion free zones, but "curiously, so much of the culture in HE implies that they are" (Mortiboys, 2002, p.7 in Beard et al., 2007, p.236). The results of the thematic analysis which viewed the comments through a critical realist lens provided examples of the 'best' staff displaying empathy and

understanding, is evidence of cultures that are not emotion free zones but the opposite was also apparent in the 'could improve' comments.

Kahu's (2013) identifies psychosocial influence as integral to SE, positive emotional experiences enhancing cognitive interest and lead students to be more engaged in the learning process, but it is the emotional support from teachers that triggers emotional and cognitive interest, and ultimately engagement (Mazer, 2017). However, the impact of the learning environment and task design on student emotions is largely unexplored (Quinlan, 2016; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014).

### 6.3. The teacher student relationship in higher education

Hagenauer & Volet (2014) note that despite the importance of the teacher-student relationship (TSR) in university, it remains an under-researched field. As a multidimensional construct, it has both interpersonal and professional dimensions. The authors identify these dimensions as 'support' and 'affective' (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014, p.374). The support dimension represents the professional relationship, i.e., the mutual contribution that the student and teacher bring to the learning, while the affective dimension comprises the interpersonal or emotional connections that are formed between the two. The affective dimension forms the basis of secure and positively experienced relationships, while the support dimension is marked by teachers setting clear expectations and answering emails promptly (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014, p.374). The student faculty relationship is more important in predicting students' social-emotional functioning than their academic performance and implies that when the support-seeking dimension to these relationships is nurtured it can shape positive student outcomes (Decker et al., 2007).

Thematic Analysis (TA) of the student comments provides evidence of the influence of the affective and support dimensions in the TSR in Irish HE. Linear regression of the ISSE quantitative indicators revealed that across the years (2016-2019) between 24% and 32% of the variation in student Academic Engagement may be predicted by the Relational Teaching composite variable which combined effective teaching and student faculty interaction. However, while the data showed that a relationship existed, it is important to stress that the direction of the relationship cannot be established with certainty and the possibility that reverse causality might be at play, needs to be considered. In their study, on the quality and frequency of student faculty interaction as predictors of learning among students by race and ethnicity, Lundberg and Schreiner (2004) found that the quality of relationships with faculty was the only variable that significantly predicted learning for all the racial/ethnic groups. Martin and Collie (2018) used linear regression to test the effect on high school students of positive teacher relationships. They found that an increase in the number of positive relationships (relative to negative relationships) that students had with their subject teachers had a significant linear (main) effect that predicted student engagement. Overall, performing linear regression on the ISSE quantitative data added important insights on how teacher attitudes and actions may predict students' engagement. This insight when combined with the qualitative results which revealed the influence of supportive caring TSRs on student engagement, provide further evidence of the complexity of the SE phenomenon.

The analysis of the comments revealed that the opportunity to interact with teachers and the perceived quality of those interactions, impacts on students' capacity to engage. Baumeister & Leary (1995) emphasise that interactions must

be distinguished from relationships as interactions function as antecedents to relationships. The results of this study confirm that the opportunities that students have to interact with academic staff function as an antecedent to the TSR. Hagenauer & Volet are critical of empirical studies whose attempts to assess the quality of the TSR fail to differentiate between situation bound antecedents, and the constituents of the TSR. For students in Irish HE, the teaching spaces are where interactions happen. Tinto (1997) views classroom interactions as socio-academic moments for social and academic integration to occur simultaneously. The plethora of 'best' comments that identify as 'best' lecturers who 'let' or 'allow' students to ask questions, and encourage discussion and feedback in class, support Hagenauer & Volet's research that affective and supportive interactions are antecedents to the formation of the TSR.

Students specifically single out for mention those teachers that are open to taking questions as the following comment illustrates. "Lecturers are often open to student interaction and willingly take questions during lectures." That this is identified as a 'best' practice is surprising given that one of the ISSE quantitative questions which I included in the Academic Engagement composite variable specifically asks students how often they have "asked questions or contributed to discussions in class, tutorials, labs or online". The question seems unfair in light of the evidence here that the opportunity to ask a question in class is most likely controlled by the teacher, or as illustrated in the CA of comments, made possible or easier and experienced as more intense in small group settings such as tutorials (Komarraju et al., 2010).

## 6.4. Teacher approachability

The student ISSE comments confirm that students' willingness or capacity to connect with teachers is linked to teacher perceived approachability. "Teacher approachability is difficult to assign to either the affective or the supportive dimension, as approachability itself can be regarded as a multi-dimensional construct requiring conceptual clarification" (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014, p.377). Student evaluation surveys measure teacher approachability with questions about teacher's friendliness, availability, helpfulness, and concern for students (Feldman,1992). In their research on student perceptions, Denzine & Pulos (2000; 2005) found that behaviours that suggested concern for students such as knowing names, and being available to meet, were associated with approachability, while condescending behaviour such as talking down to students, appearing bored while teaching, or humiliating students, were associated with unapproachable teachers.

Students' perceptions of teacher approachability not only impacts on their enjoyment of learning but also on their ability to raise issues that affect their studies. Thematic analysis highlighted how teacher distance was often maintained and enabled through the systems of large group teaching and use of PowerPoint lectures that supported didactic one-way transmission of information. However, the impressions that teachers convey through their attitudes and actions can further stymie student agency to shape their learning. These tacit but perceptible signifiers of distance or hierarchy create a culture that serves to exclude rather than include students. This was often experienced as linked to the system of hierarchy that prevails in HE which runs counter to SaP approaches discussed in the literature review where students are recognised as legitimate stakeholders in their education. Faculty who maintain their distance based on

hierarchy and unequal power relationships can render students powerless and vulnerable and uncomfortable approaching lecturers. The following simple request in this 'could improve' comment captures this best: "By encouraging the lecturers to talk to us more at our level instead of down to us, which some do quite a bit" (what could improve comment, ISSE 2016).

### 6.4.1 Approachability and Care

While teacher approachability can function as a facilitator (Sinclair et al., 2003) or invitation to interact, students also see approachability as indicative of teachers' care for students. The many student comments that refer to care provide evidence that teachers who demonstrate care for students positively influence their engagement. Teaching underpinned by an ethics of care, constitutes a relational pedagogy, a state of being in a relationship with students that is characterised by relatedness, empathy and engrossment (Noddings, 2004). A relational pedagogy is based on dialogue (Buber, 1996) and requires teachers to have broad competence in a variety of subjects (Noddings, 2004). Adopting a relational pedagogy enhances the student experience impacting on self-esteem and increased interest in the subject matter.

## 6.5 Permission to speak

Critical analysis of the student comments revealed barriers to SE among which was the freedom students were given to interact in the classroom. Interaction had to be encouraged by the lecturers both through their attitude and openness and also their teaching methods. Interaction then determined whether students could ask questions or if lecturers would or could respond to questions. A surprising and worrying result was the number of comments that identified as a 'best' aspect

those lecturers that allowed or encouraged questions, reflecting students' impoverished expectations of the process of HE teaching. Freire's (2005) deeply dialectical and dialogical notion of power holds that power is always working both on and through all of us, emphasising the necessity of becoming aware of the ways in which we reproduce power dynamics and ways in which we can attempt to disrupt them. Critical pedagogies stand in stark opposition to Freire's concept of a 'banking education', the transfer of knowledge into the heads of the students. "This relationship involves a narrating subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified" (Freire, 2005, p.73).

### 6.6 Size matters

Institutional and class size impact on students' capacity and willingness to engage. Students in small institutes referenced the institute size inferring that this allowed them to get to know their lecturers and classmates more easily. Similarly, class size impacts on engagement most frequently in how it enables or stymies interaction between students and teachers. This is not a new finding as Biggs (2011) emphasises that as class size increases, the problems students and teacher face increase accordingly. Specifically, he makes reference to how opportunities for interaction between students, their peers and teachers are reduced in large group settings, giving rise to both anonymity and passivity among students. Gibbs (1992) concurs highlighting that low levels of motivation and participation among students are frequently associated with learning in large classes. Interaction is easiest for students in small group contexts with tutorials, seminars and lab classes representing the best aspects of their experience.

It is clear also that large group teaching is not conducive to discussion or interaction but those teachers who leveraged technology to bridge the communication gap inherent in the structure and context of the large group lecture were singled out for mention. Polling software that allowed teachers to ask questions and students to respond is particularly welcome with many of the 'could improve' comments requesting that increased use of such technology would aid their engagement.

Technology, however, doesn't always enhance learning with the abuse or overuse of PowerPoint singled out for mention by many students. Lecturers whose teaching consisted of reading aloud bulleted chunks of information were criticised both for boring students who listened passively or forcing them to spend the hour transcribing notes furiously. Many student comments referred to the one-way transmission of information from teacher to students in 'death by PowerPoint' lectures. Students bemoaned the impact of such delivery on their opportunities to interact with the teacher and each other, to ask questions, or engage in dialogue.

Noteworthy is that students in many of the comments stated their preference for lecture slides to be uploaded in advance so that they could download them and spend the class time listening and note making rather than note taking. Ironically, one of the ISSE quantitative questions specifically asks students how often they have come to class "without completing readings or assignments" when the student comments point to prior readings such as lecture notes not being made available to them. This was one of the questions included in the composite Academic Engagement dependent variable used in the simple linear regression. Two of the ISSE quantitative questions that make up the

Learning Strategies indicator ask students “how often they reviewed their notes after class” and how often they “summarised what you learned in class or from course materials”. Given how student comments describe an often-one-way process of lecture information transmission, the fairness of this question can be raised. Where students are forced to transcribe as lecturers read their lecture notes, one can only assume that there is little time for students to elaborate or indeed reflect on what is being taught and this may make the chances of students reviewing their notes less likely. Transcribing notes can lead to students struggling to make sense of the connection between the content if their transcription is incomplete or incoherent.

## 6.7 Respect among equals

Respect is a topic that is raised often in the comments and is often linked to approaches to learning that are collaborative and where all knowledge is valued. This is indicative of teaching that is underpinned by humility where the teacher demonstrates a genuine desire to learn from and with students. It reflects humility on the part of the teacher recognising that “Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers” (Freire, 2005, p.61).

## 6.8 Flexibility

Flexibility matters to students both in the institute policies and the process of teaching. Flexibility was a theme that ran through the best and could improve comments. Students who studied part-time or through distance modes valued the flexibility that this afforded them to work and manage caring responsibilities while upskilling. Full-time students also place particular importance on online resources and communication particularly when work or caring responsibilities prevent them from attending campus. They are appreciative of lecturers who upload their resources online and are critical of those academic staff who don't make use of the flexibility that the virtual learning environment offers. In the same vein, students depend on email as a means of interacting with staff on a one-to-one basis. This is particularly important for students who may not get to campus or those perhaps in first year who are reluctant to ask questions in class. Similarly, timetables can be a cause of concern for students as many students comment on their late publication or last-minute changes that are not communicated to them in time. This is an example of how the flexibility that is often afforded academic staff to change their timetables can have a detrimental effect on students' work or caring responsibilities.

## 6.9 Student surveillance and performativity

The lack of flexibility implied in many of the comments may reflect an increasing culture of student surveillance. Student performativity (MacFarlane, 2015), comprising rules around attendance, are equally frustrating for students as this 'could improve' comment implies.

> Stop taking attendance during every class, were (sic) all adults so stop treating us as children. If someone doesn't show up to class instead of threatening academic disciplinary action perhaps try understanding why they haven't attended in the 1st place (what could improve comment, ISSE,2018).

MacFarlane borrows the word presenteeism from the world of work to refer to attendance policies that remove students' right to be treated as adults, capable of exercising choice about how they engage (MacFarlane, 2015). He argues that the now common attendance requirements are justified by institutions thus: as concern for student welfare and success; as a means of developing work related standards such as punctuality and reliability; and as a way of being accountable to society who funds HE (MacFarlane, 2015, p.341). Such policies reflect a lack of trust in students and is evidenced by the use of attendance registers and assessment related proxies for attendance such as in-class presentations or tests. These performative pressures have a negative effect on the rights of students as autonomous adults to choose how to use study time, to learn as individuals, to speak or be reticent, and to develop their own ideas and values (MacFarlane, 2015, p.339). This study responds to MacFarlane's call for more research into the performativity student perspective and, crucially, a more critical focus on the impact of the engagement agenda on the freedom to learn. As previously discussed in the introductory chapters, widening participation has transformed the profile of the HE student, yet, I argue, this shift has failed to transform HE structures and practices. The use of performativity measures are arguably a means of accounting for how we are responding to the needs of our diverse populations, instigating measures that demand that students engage with

the systems designed to control learning. The following comment submitted by a mature student (23 years and over) gives pause for thought.

> Change the teaching style and accept that there more mature students on the campus; Enshure (sic) that life experience counts; don't talk down to the mature students (the most mature students are older than the lecturers) they are not little children anymore and don't need to be told how, what, where etc. things have to be done. Accept their opinion. (could improve comment, ISSE, 2013).

Systems of accountability and performativity can function as instruments that maintain the status quo in HE. This echoes Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of ‘habitus’ as a structuring mechanism that is comprised of a system of durable, transposable, agential dispositions which function as structuring structures and where change is only ever being triggered in times of crisis (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.131).

# Chapter 7 – Conclusions and recommendations

## 7.1 A model of student engagement in higher education

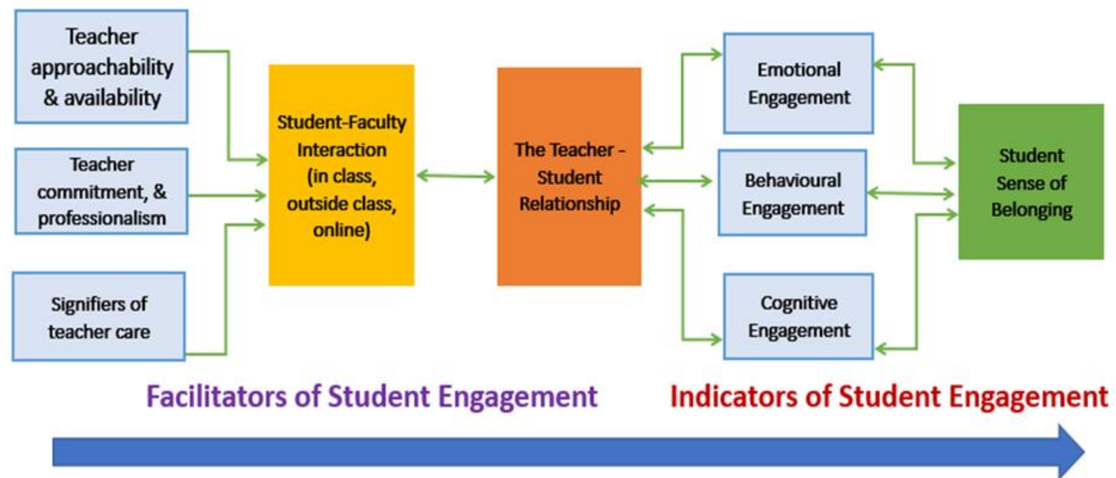
The extensive analysis of the thousands of feedback comments submitted by students in the ISSE reveals a clear picture of what engages students in Irish HE. Crucially, the results raise questions around the policy of not treating the qualitative responses in the survey as equally important to the quantitative responses. The consistency of content in the multi-year comments indicate that issues such as didactic forms of teaching, lack of interaction in large group teaching, and a lack of clarity around assessment criteria, are sector wide and not particular to any one institution, although there is some evidence that smaller institutions fare better in this regard. This means that, if analysed and published nationally, not only would the comment insights be shared across institutions, it would increase the chances of the common issues reaching the ears of those best placed to respond – the teachers themselves. As discussed earlier in this thesis, the ISSE is administered by registry departments who have responsibilty for quality assurance, so at present the full results are returned to them for local analysis and disemmination. Whether they reach the eyes and ears of the teachers is dependent on if or how efficiently the information filters through the layers of hierarchy typical in today's HE institutions.

To recap, this study was guided by two questions.

> **Research Question 1.** What can the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) qualitative comments tell us about what students consider engages them?
>
> **Research Question 2.** In what contexts do students and teachers interact and what is the nature and quality of these interactions?

The search of the literature, and the prolonged and extensive analysis of the data allowed me to distinguish between the *indicators* and the *facilitators* of student engagement and led me to develop a model of SE in HE which is presented in Figure 18.

**Figure 18** – In their own words – A model of student engagement in Irish higher education




The model reflects what students consider engages them. The teacher-student relationship is central to engagement but dependent on SFI in class, outside class, or increasingly online via email in virtual learning enviroments. However, SFI is dependent on teacher attitudes, characteristics and approaches and is influenced by perceptions of teacher approachability, such as friendliness, smiling and using student names. Teacher professionalism is evidenced through mutually respectful relationships and teachers' careful curation of content, which when coupled with their efforts to ensure interaction and collaboration, are signifiers of the teacher's commitment to student learning. Furthermore, where students are taught in large group lectures, students are appreciative of teachers who employ interactive technologies to bridge the distance between them. Finally, a variety of supportive behaviours which cover academic and personal

concern for students are signifiers of teachers who care about their students' success. While Figure 18 displays these variables as separate antecedents, they no doubt overlap (as the student comments indicate) making it impossible to establish any demarcation boundaries.

Positive teacher student relationships (TSRs) develop over time as indicated by the two way arrow between the TSR and SFI and this in turn leads to emotional, behavioural, and cognitive engagement, which also develops over time as indicated by the two way arrow. Finally, engagement as it develops leads to that all important predictor of student persistence and success, the student's sense of belonging. The student perspective model could serve as a process for the delivery of a relational pedagogy as the foundation for co-creating learning and teaching (Bovill, 2020).

That belonging, SFI and relationships with academics are important but to date are not captured in the ISSE or the original survey the American NSSE. This is evidenced, as discussed earlier, by the introduction in Spring 2020 of two additonal topic modules (Appendix E) that can be added to the NSSE and distributed by institutions in the U.S and Canada.

### 7.1.1 One size does not fit all

A criticism of surveys of engagement is that they are premised on notions of the ideal student participating in ways that are public and observable (Gourlay, 2015). The ideal student is not reflective of the highly complex and textured lives of todays' students, lives not currently captured in mainstream SE studies (Trowler & Schreiber 2020) and which have been brought into sharp focus following the onset of COVID-19.

The classroom, where staff and students meet, is key to understanding these textured lives, yet the opportunities for relational pedagogy are often under-used (Bovill, 2020, p.2). In a massified HE context, traditional pedagogical models can fall short and staff are challenged to support students so that they feel they are valued and belong (Bovill, 2020).

Thematic analysis of the Irish student comments confirmed the complex nature of the student experience with marked differences between student cohorts. While space did not permit the indepth analysis of comments by specific cohorts, it was impossible not to notice differences among sub-groups. Conscious that HE can be selective in its hearing of voices (Lygo-Baker et al., 2019), in the interest of inclusiveness I felt obliged to amplify these voices, albeit at a surface level. The most striking differences that I noted were among non-traditional students, those cohorts generally under-represented in HE. Definitions of non-traditional students vary to include first in family to attend HE, mature students, disabled students, single parents, students from low-income families, and minority ethnic groups. For these cohorts their route to college may render them unprepared for the academic demands of HE, and although many instutions offer such supports, the practice may not be widespread or students may be unaware of them.

A significant cohort of students in Irish HE commute to college and for these students the HE experience is very different from their peers who leave home to go to college and enjoy the benefits of a residential HE experience (Gormley, 2016; Dwyer, 2017). Commuter students are often not categorised as 'non-traditional' yet these students often experience intersectional disadvantage (Pokorny et al, 2017), where multiple factors impact a student's opportunity to

actively engage. Most commuter students commute for financial reasons: they cannot afford to live on or near campus and often need to maintain their jobs in order to be able to attend HE. Many are mature students who are returning to education and who are balancing work and caring responsibilities with full time study. However, many commuter students also fall within the traditional age group (under 23) but they too are often parents balancing work and caring responsibilities. For these students attendance on campus can be hampered by work or family or simply not having enough money to travel to campus for classes as this 'could improve' comments illustrates.

> "Staff should be more considerate of issues for mature students, young families can often get in the way of deadlines and most students cannot afford €50 for a sick cert to get an extension when their child is ill.
> (could improve comments, ISSE 2013-2019).

For many of these students travelling to college or university comes at a price and timetabling issues are particularly frustrating for them. Students with work and family responsibilities need timetables to be provided well in advance so they can plan. Unannounced absences of academic teaching staff cause particular problems for commuters.

> More lecturers could make use of webcourses and make notes available to those who cannot attend every single lecture. If a lecturer is absent or if a lecture is cancelled/rescheduled PRIOR NOTICE should be sent to students via TEXT ALERT systems as with other colleges. I am on the road to college at 6.30am and do not check my emails every morning before I leave, often having made a wasted journey with no class to attend, with no warning what so ever or an email an hour before hand (could improve comment, ISSE 2013).

There is a lot to explore here in terms of how we categorise learners and how our systems are not accommodating of their needs. These comments mostly refer to the systems and rules that govern how we run our institutions and which pose additional and arguably unnecessary challenges for students over and above the demands of the course. While analysis at the level of student sub-groups was not an aim of this study, having read these comments I felt morally obliged to raise their issues and perhaps highlight the challenges that students are dealing with when trying to complete their studies.

### 7.1.2 What ISSE forgot

What is perhaps the most impactful conclusion from this study is how it has brought into sharp focus the limited value of the ISSE quantitative indices *when used alone* to guide the improvements that the instrument is designed to effect. As identified in the literature review, surveys like the ISSE produce indicators that are outcomes focused and measure what already has happened, presumably to inform or predict what might happen in the future. However, critics of the NSSE tend to focus on the instrument's claims around measurement and how the survey results are interpreted, while ignoring questions of SE as a process or an outcome (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). The NSSE, I argue, over-emphasises SE as an outcome and minimises the influence of the processes that facilitate SE. It would be impossible for institutions to realise Coates's claim that the survey's insights would provide a stimulus to guide new thinking about best practice (Coates, 2008, p.2). In the absence of close analysis of the qualitative comments, institutions would simply be guessing at the underlying causes that give rise to the indicators.

## 7.2 The trouble with ISSE

In light of the findings of this study, I revisited the ISSE ***quantitative*** questions to review the extent to which responsibility for engagement was shared between the student and the institute. The detailed and critical analysis of the student comments forced me to reflect on how much or little control students actually had over their engagement: this was particularly striking in the many comments that detailed the 'learning by listening' practice that students cite as not facilitating interaction and engagement often remarking that these sessions were a waste of their time. The ISSE, like both the NSSE and the AUSSE, is premised on a view of engagement as the combination of the time and effort that students exert in meaningful and purposeful educational activities, and the extent to which institutions provide such opportunities and encourage students to engage with them (Kuh, 2001; 2003; 2008). Canvasing, understanding and responding to student concerns is central to the ISSE, concerns which the analysis of the comments helped to reveal and explain. In particular the comments signpost where institutions and teachers could do more to facilitate student engagement.

## 7.3 ISSE as a one-sided lens for measuring engagement?

Listening to the students has highlighted how one-sided the survey questions are. Across the literature, engagement is seen as a shared responsibility between the student and the institution, but in light of the results of this study, I reviewed the questions and indicators through a critical lens and I concluded that the ISSE 67-question survey places the bulk of the responsibility for engagement on the individual student. Of the 9 indicators that are collated in the survey, only the Supportive Environment indices directly assesses

institutional efforts to support students. That indicator asks students eight questions that are prefaced by “How much does your institution emphasise…” and this is followed by prompts such as “providing support to help students succeed academically”. The Effective Teaching index is directed at the provision of teaching and assessment so techncially the responsibility of the institution. Who is responsible for a further two indicators, Higher Order Learning and Quality of Interactions, is unclear in the ISSE and could conceivably be assigned to both the student and the institution. The four questions that comprise the Higher Order Learning questions have as their stem “During the current academic year, how much has your coursework emphasised… plus questions such as this,..applying facts, theories or methods to practical problems or new situations?”. These questions are all directed at the level of the course content and could conceivably be linked to the individual assessment practices of teachers, the design of modules or progammes, or how students approached their assessment and learning. The Quality of Interactions index asks students to evaluate the quality of interactions at their institutions and encompasses interactions with students, academic staff, support staff, and other administrative staff. Again, who is responsbile for the quality of those interactions is, I argue, unclear.

Five of the nine indicators use questions that place responsibility for engagement firmly on the shoulders of the individual student. These are the indicators that ask students “During the current academic year, about how often have you…” and then this is followed by questions that ask students to report the frequency with which they engaged in specific behaviours. In addition to the indicators, of the 22 questions that are not included in the indicators, eight of them use this same question that focuses on what the student does. A further ten

questions ask “how much has your experience at this institution contributed to …” the development of a variety of skills and competences and the remaining four questions ask students about their future intentions and overall evaluation of their instituional experience. In total then, of the 67 questions in the survey, 33 are directed at the student and their perspectives and engagement, but as outlined here, of the remainder, only 13 are identifed as the responsibility of the institute (Supportive Environment) and the teacher/institute (Effective Teaching). What remains could fit into the category of ‘diffused responsibility’ thereby ensuring that no-one will be accountable for their amelioration.

Proponents of the NSSE claim that because of its strong emphasis on student behaviours, the results signpost institutional interventions that are both concrete and actionable. However, this study’s findings confirm that the quantitative indicators provide neither the nuance nor the context that could inform such diagnostic action. Rather, it is in the detail and critical analysis of the open-ended comments where opportunities for improving the undergraduate student experience lie.

The extensive analysis of student feedback in the first seven years of the ISSE confirms that “When students speak about learning they do so in highly emotional terms” (Brookfield,1990, p.45). Yet, none of the quantitative questions in the ISSE (the only questions that are analysed and published at a national level) directly ask students about the affective aspects of their learning The questions that comprise the Supportive Environment and Quality of Interactions could indirectly be interpreted as indicative of students affective experiences as these questions ask students to evaluate their overall experience, and if they could start all over, would they attend the same institution again.

It is perhaps an indication of the NSSE's acceptance of this oversight and their recognition of the importance of the affective aspects of engagement, that in Spring 2020 they offered institutions new topical modules (Appendix E). These additional survey items seek student feedback on their sense of belonging in the institution and also the frequency, quality, and outcomes of their interactions with Academic Advisors. The results from the use of these additional items by US colleges informed reports that were published in November 2020. Entitled *Building a Sense of Community for All*, they examine the relationships between students' sense of belonging (an addition to the 2020 survey) and their engagement, perceived gains, and persistence.

The NSSE defines belonging as a combination of "The psychological feeling of belonging or connectedness to a social, spatial, cultural, professional, or other type of group or a community" (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p 324). Strayhorn explains it as students' sense that they are respected, valued, accepted, cared for and included in college and in the classroom (Strayhorn, 2012). NSSE plans to introduce further topical modules in February 2021 and these will focus on a deep exploration of the quality of high impact practices from an equity lens and identify the trust gap between undergraduates and their institutions. The present and planned addition of questions and topics that focus more on the affective side of learning and students' emotional engagement with their institutions appears to represent a shift in thinking about what really matters to today's HE student. This perceived shift resonates with the many student comments that reference the importance of respect, care or inclusion in Irish HE and I argue confirms the importance of listening to what students, in their own words, say matters most to them. Furthermore, the results of this study have provided extensive support for

the annual analysis of the ISSE qualitative comments. It is notable that the NSSE's introduction of the additional modules to include the emotional side of engagement was planned in advance of Covid-19 but one could assume that the unexpected and widespread move to online teaching undoubtedly has brought into sharp focus students' affective engagement and integration into their institutions.

### 7.4 Limitations and future directions of the research

There is so much that one can analyse and discuss based on the rich and nuanced comments in this study's data. Reading and analysing the comments, I could not help but notice that certain cohorts of students (first-year, part-time, remote/online, mature) expressed concerns that were linked to their status or standing. Time and space did not allow for the analysis of sub-groups and the assessment of differences in student perceptions by institution type, age, year of study, study mode, domicile and discipline. Further research could provide information that could prove useful in designing interventions that could address more specifically these groups' concerns. In particular, there is an opportunity to explore the experiences of students studying in blended or exclusively online modes given that HE in Ireland is being delivered almost exclusively online since March 2020. Online completion rates are traditonally lower than those of face to face campus courses (Atchley et al., 2013) so the issue of managing student expectations and building the all important teacher student relationship in a virutal environment poses challenges over and above those encountered in the face to face classroom.

Simple linear regression was performed on four years of data to test if a composite variable, Relational Teaching could predict Academic Engagement ,

the dependent composite variable. While the data showed that there is a relationship between predictor variable, Relational Teaching and the outcome variable, Academic Engagement, the direction of the effect is difficult to establish as it my be that students that are more engaged actually influence relational teaching and not the other way around. There is scope to explore more fully the statistical relationships between the ISSE quantative indicators and this could be an topic for further research.

This study did not analyse the data based on study mode but this is an area that could be explored as many of the respondents to the ISSE are studying part-time, often in distance, blended or fully online mode. While there is ample opportunity to conduct research with the present student cohort studying exclusively online due to Covid-19 restrictions, significant insights could be gained by exploring the student online or blended experience pre-pandemic and this too could be an area for further research.

Many student comments capture student perceptions of teacher qualifications, interest or work ethic and time and space did not allow for unpacking a range of possible contributing issues. These could be the increasing casualisation of teaching; fear amongst those teaching on precarious contracts; lecturers teaching subjects outside their areas of expertise and training; the burden of additional adminstration that teachers must complete; reward for research over teaching; and fear that student appeals and legislation such as that relating to freedom of information that frightens teachers into putting in writing anything that could come back to haunt them. As Fullan & Hargreaves (1992) suggest, future research should actively listen to and sponsor the teacher voice so that all perspectives can contribute to the development of teacher student

relationships that are built on trust, credibility, and respect that support relational pedagogies. Finally, corpus data while providing large sample sizes, the representativeness of which can be tested, can still be affected by response bias, the concern being that those who responded may not be representative of the general population. However, the use of data spanning seven years and the similarity in the quantative results and the content of the student comments addresses this challenge.

### 7.5 Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations are made.

- The qualitative comments submitted by students should be treated as equally important to the quantitative responses, analysed at a national level and the results published in the national report. Leximancer or similar software can facilitate this task for staff in institutions who would not need to have specific data analysis skills. The software enables the swift identification of the most prevalent themes in the data which if followed by critical analysis of the comments can help to identify the root causes of student concerns. This can then be used to explain the quantitative benchmarks providing more clarity on the reality of the student experience. In particular the analysis should focus on the comments of different cohorts to explore their specific needs. These could include mature students, those with disabilities, marginalised groups such as ethnic minorities, LGBTQ students; mature students and students studying part time and or at a distance.

- The ISSE questions should be reviewed or added to so that the *affective* aspects of learning are adequately addressed.
- The data resulting from the ISSE should be mined specifically to explore the experiences and concerns of students studying remotely in online or blended modes as this can inform the ongoing design of teaching in the Covid-19 era.
- Disemmination of the results should target teaching and learning conferences ensuring that the findings contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning as well as SE literature.
- The policy of large group teaching, in first-year particularly, prevalent in the university sector should be reviewed. Ironically as students progress through their studies and develop their academic skills, class groups actually decrease with the most experienced postgraduate taught students often enjoying the smallest class sizes. The issue of large group teaching is even more pressing in light of the forced move to exclusively online teaching due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Large group lectures that transmit information by PowerPoint are more suited to pre-recorded formats that can be accessed by students as preparation for small group discussion.

## 7.6 Final personal reflection

Having completed 6 modules in this professional doctorate in education (Ed. D) in advance of producing the thesis, I have learned a lot, not only in the formal teaching and research supervision but also in my understanding of the lives of our students. I have argued here that the student comments constitute the authentic student voice in Irish HE, unadorned due to the safety that the anonymity of the online web-based survey affords them. They are the voices of

Irish HE students but they could easily be my voice as well. When contrasted with the fixed-ended questions where the ideas of powerful others are boxed up neatly for students' ease of compliant ticking, the open-ended responses are a 'practice in freedom' (Freire, 1996). It is my hope that the analysis of the rich corpus of comments can contribute to our general understanding of the SE concept and the importance of including authentic student voices in how we design and deliver learning. This thesis started with Agatha's words and it seems fitting that I should also finish with more Agatha wisdom

> "The expected has happened, and when the expected happens, it always causes me emotion" (Agatha Christie, *The Mystery of the Blue Train*).

## Appendices

**Appendix A** – ISSE question indicators and ethical approval

Student Survey.ie – Survey Instrument Questions

### HIGHER-ORDER LEARNING

During the current academic year, how much has your coursework emphasised... [very little, some, quite a bit, very much]

- Applying facts, theories, or methods to practical problems or new situations
- Analysing an idea, experience, or line of reasoning in depth by examining its parts
- Evaluating a point of view, decision, or information source
- Forming an understanding or new idea from various pieces of information

### REFLECTIVE AND INTEGRATIVE LEARNING

During the current academic year, about how often have you... [never, sometimes, often, very often]

- Combined ideas from different subjects/ modules when completing assignments?
- Connected your learning to problems or issues in society?
- Included diverse perspectives (political, religious, racial/ethnic, gender, etc.) in discussions or assignments?
- Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue?
- Tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from their perspective?
- Learned something that changed the way you understand an issue or concept?
- Connected ideas from your subjects/ modules to your prior experiences and knowledge?

### QUANTITATIVE REASONING

During the current academic year, about how often have you... [never, sometimes, often, very often]

- Reached conclusions based on your analysis of numerical information (numbers, graphs, statistics, etc.)?

• Used numerical information to examine a real-world problem or issue (unemployment, climate change, public health, etc.)?

• Evaluated what others have concluded from numerical information?

## LEARNING STRATEGIES

During the current academic year, about how often have you... [never, sometimes, often, very often]

• Identified key information from recommended reading materials?

• Reviewed your notes after class?

• Summarised what you learned in class or from course materials?

## COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

During the current academic year, about how often have you... [never, sometimes, often, very often]

• Asked another student to help you understand course material?

• Explained course material to one or more students?

• Prepared for exams by discussing or working through course material with other students?

• Worked with other students on projects or assignments?

## STUDENT-FACULTY INTERACTION

During the current academic year, about how often have you... [never, sometimes, often, very often]

• Talked about career plans with academic staff?

• Worked with academic staff on activities other than coursework (committees, student groups, etc.)?

• Discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with academic staff outside of class?

• Discussed your performance with academic staff?

## EFFECTIVE TEACHING PRACTICES

During the current academic year, to what extent have lecturers/ teaching staff... [very little, some, quite a bit, very much]

• Clearly explained course goals and requirements?

• Taught in an organised way?

• Used examples or illustrations to explain difficult points?

• Provided feedback on a draft or work in progress?

• Provided prompt and detailed feedback on tests or completed assignments?

## QUALITY OF INTERACTIONS

At your institution, please indicate the quality of interactions with... [Poor, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, Excellent, N/A]

• Students

• Academic advisors

• Academic staff

• Support services staff (career services, student activities, accommodation, etc.)

• Other administrative staff and offices (registry, finance, etc.)

## SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT

How much does your institution emphasise... [very little, some, quite a bit, very much]?

• Providing support to help students succeed academically?

• Using learning support services (learning centre, computer centre, maths support, writing support etc.)?

• Contact among students from different backgrounds (social, racial/ethnic, religious, etc.)?

• Providing opportunities to be involved socially?

• Providing support for your overall well-being (recreation, health care, counselling, etc.)?

• Helping you manage your non-academic responsibilities (work, family, etc.)?

• Attending campus activities and events (special speakers, cultural performances, sporting events, etc.)?

• Attending events that address important social, economic, or political issues?

## Non- Indicator Questions

1. Asked questions or contributed to discussions in class, tutorials, labs or online
2. Come to class without completing readings or assignments
3. Made a presentation in class or online
4. Improved knowledge and skills that will contribute to your employability
5. Explored how to apply your learning in the workplace

6. Exercised or participated in physical fitness activities
7. Blended academic learning with workplace experience
8. Worked on assessments that informed you how well you are learning
9. Memorising course material
10. Work with academic staff on a research project
11. Community service or volunteer work
12. Spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work
13. Writing clearly and effectively
14. Speaking clearly and effectively
15. Thinking critically and analytically
16. Analysing numerical and statistical information
17. Acquiring job- or work-related knowledge and skills
18. Working effectively with others
19. Solving complex real-world problems
20. Being an informed and active citizen (societal / political / community)
21. How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?
22. If you could start over again, would you go to the same institution you are now attending

## **Appendix B** – Irish Survey of Student Engagement Data Use/Analysis Confidentiality Agreement

1. The implementation of a national student survey was identified as a priority in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. The report recommends that higher education institutions should put in place systems to capture feedback from students to inform institutional and programme management, as well as national policy. It also recommends that every higher education institution should put in place a comprehensive anonymous student feedback system, coupled with structures to ensure that action is taken promptly in relation to student concerns.

2. A collaborative project governance and management structure was established for an Irish Survey of Student Engagement. This was designed to ensure representation of institutions and of co-sponsors and this structure has proved effective to progress the project whilst taking account of the views of stakeholders. The StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group provides overall strategic direction for continued development and implementation of StudentSurvey.ie. This group discusses any individual requests for use or analysis of the

StudentSurvey.ie dataset, beyond that undertaken by participating institutions or published by the national project.

3. Confidentiality is guaranteed to students responding to the survey. This is regarded as vital commitment to encourage participation. Data files returned to institutions have been cleaned to remove student IDs and any individual names that may have been present free text responses. To date, published reports include analysis of national and sector data but do not include data that could be used to identify individual institutions. In future years, when institution-level data may be published, an agreed protocol will be adopted to support a collaborative and consistent approach to the publication of such data.

4. Access to the national dataset (or specific subsets thereof, other than data files provided to individual institutions) is provided solely for the purpose of defining and undertaking any such analysis, as is deemed appropriate by the StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group, and has been approved by that group. This agreement covers the period from release of the specific dataset to the named researcher until the conclusion of the specified research/ analysis. When analysis has been completed and any resulting dataset(s), tables or results have been finalised, this agreement shall not apply to any data that is placed in the public domain by other project partners.

5. The data will be made available solely for the purpose of the identified research. Therefore, no institution will have access to the data from any other institution, other than through any bilateral agreement that may be voluntarily and separately entered into.

6. Discussion / analysis relating to any data from the national dataset must be limited to the specific personnel engaged in the identified research.

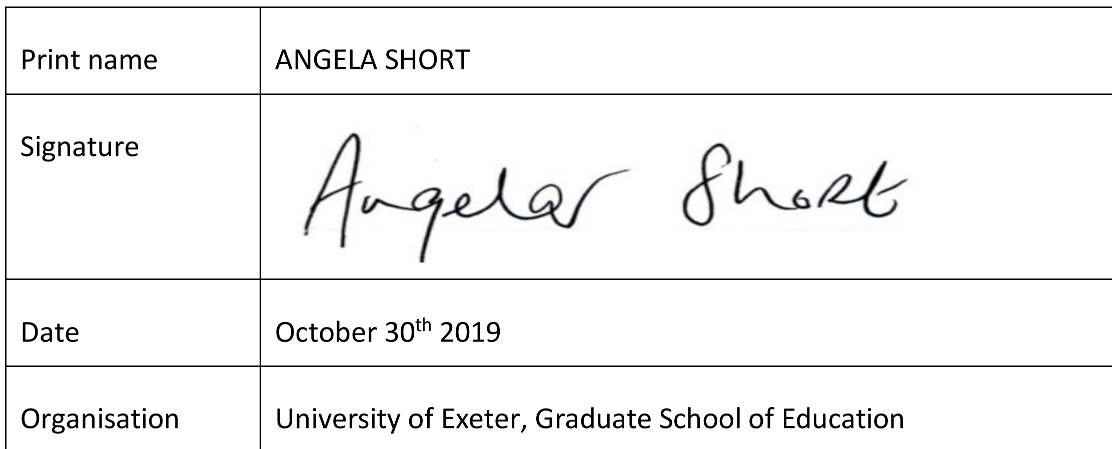
7. The recipient of the dataset(s) must commit to ensuring that the data is maintained securely and will not copy or transfer the data (e.g., by USB or email) without making arrangements to protect the data.

8. Responsibility for ensuring confidentiality of the data and of all resulting outputs (reports, tables, presentations) rests with named signatories of this agreement.

**Declaration**

| Working title of research / analysis: | **In their own words – what students in Irish higher education say engages them.** |
|---|---|
| Brief outline: | Doctoral thesis exploring what students in Irish HE consider engages them.<br>Adopting a mixed methods sequential design, the research combines human and computer assisted methods to analyse open ended survey questions. |
| Any specific conditions: Required - Individual institutions must not be identified in outputs | As has been the case with the researcher's use of previous datasets, no individual institutions are named or mentioned in the research process/outputs. |
| Confirmation of ethical approval: | Ethical approval for 2018 and 2019 datasets is sought. |
| Anticipated outputs: | Doctoral thesis completed by May 2020 – potential for publication of a number of journal papers and conference presentations. |

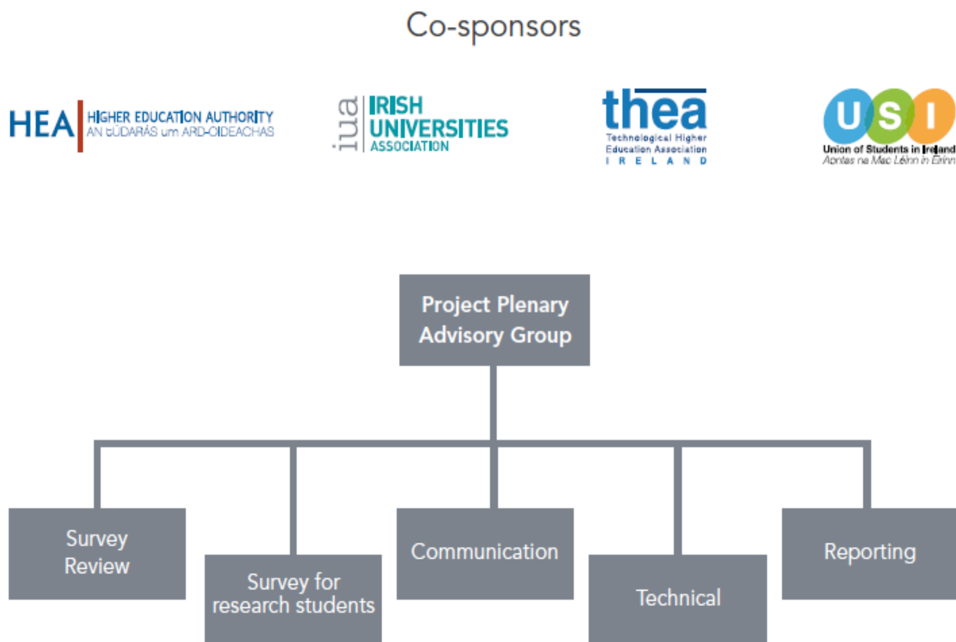
The signatory below agrees to abide by the terms set out in this agreement.



| Print name | ANGELA SHORT |
|---|---|
| Signature | Angela Short |
| Date | October 30th 2019 |
| Organisation | University of Exeter, Graduate School of Education |

## ISSE Project working group structures

**Figure A.1 Project working group structures**



**Appendix C** – Bovill & Bulley (2011) Permission to reproduce figure

## Oxford Brookes Bovill & Bulley permission

Dear Angela,

Apologies for a delayed response. I am covering Amanda's role now she has left the university.

We are happy to agree permission rights to use the following material for which we hold copyright:

Bovill and Bulley. (2011) A model of active student participation in curriculum design: exploring desirability and possibility, Figure 1 page 180

The permission is subject to you giving acknowledgement of the source and referring to where the original publication can be accessed.

Please do not hesitate to contact us should you have any further queries.

Kind regards

Clare

**Clare Beesley**
**Executive Office Manager and Executive Assistant to Director of Finance and Legal Services**

**Appendix D** – Linear regression results (2016–2019)

**Simple Linear Regression – ANOVA and Coefficients**

| Relational Teaching Predictor | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Standard Error of Estimate | Coefficients Unstandardised | Std. error | Beta | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2019 | .568 | .322 | .322 | 37.76818 | .996 | .008 | .568 | .000 |
| 2018 | .554 | .307 | .307 | 37.72069 | .969 | .008 | .554 | .000 |
| 2017 | .497 | .247 | .247 | 39.16144 | .418 | .004 | .497 | .000 |
| 2016 | .490 | .240 | .240 | 39.17672 | .426 | .005 | .490 | .000 |

| ANOVA | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2019** | | | | | | |
| Regression | 23949518.405 | 1 | 23949518.405 | 16703,986 | .000 | |
| Residual | 51423261.739 | 35866 | 1422.761 | | | |
| Total | 75372780.144 | 35867 | | | | |
| **2018** | | | | | | |
| Regression | 21407057.352 | 1 | 21407057.352 | 15045.194 | .000 | |
| Residual | 48321417.264 | 33961 | 1422.850 | | | |
| Total | 69728474.616 | 33962 | | | | |
| **2017** | | | | | | |
| Regression | 16256284.837 | 1 | 16256284.837 | 10599.954 | .000 | |
| Residual | 49540965.574 | 32303 | 1533.618 | | | |
| Total | 65797250.411 | 32304 | | | | |
| **2016** | | | | | | |
| Regression | 13224748.758 | 1 | 13224748.758 | 8616.508 | .000 | |
| Residual | 41851073.608 | 27268 | 1534.815 | | | |
| Total | 55075822.366 | 27269 | | | | |

| Coefficients | Unstandardised Coefficients | Std. error | Standardised Coefficients Beta | t | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **2019** | | | | | |
| Constant | 102.012 | .430 | | 237.242 | .000 |
| Relational Teaching | 1.104 | .009 | .564 | 129.242 | .000 |
| **2018** | | | | | |
| Constant | 99.655 | .462 | | 215.640 | |
| Relational Teaching | .969 | .008 | .554 | 122.659 | |
| **2017** | | | | | |
| Constant | 102.912 | .506 | | 203.340 | .000 |
| Relational Teaching | .418 | .004 | .497 | 102.950 | .000 |
| **2016** | | | | | |
| Constant | 102.265 | .569 | | 179.699 | .000 |
| Relational Teaching | .426 | .005 | .490 | 92.825 | .000 |
| | . | | | | |

## Appendix E – NSSE additional modules (2020)

Available at https://nsse.indiana.edu/research/annual-results/belonging-story/index.html

**New in 2020! Sense of Belonging Items**

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (Response options: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree)

a. I feel comfortable being myself at this institution.

b. I feel valued by this institution.

c. I feel like part of the community at this institution.

**Webinar available at**
https://iu.mediaspace.kaltura.com/media/Do+Your+Students+Feel+They+BelongF+Examining+Sense+of+Belonging+and+Engagement/1_anhaewo7?

**Presentation slides available at**
https://nsse.indiana.edu/research/annual-results/belonging-story/index.html

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|---|---|---|
| **dc. contributor. author** | Kinzie, Jillian | |
| **dc. contributor. author** | BrckaLorenz, Allison | |
| **dc. contributor. author** | Lofton, Colleen | |
| **dc. date. accessioned** | 2020-12-03T13:46:43Z | |
| **dc. date. available** | 2020-12-03T13:46:43Z | |
| **dc. date. issued** | 2020-12-01 | |
| **dc. identifier. uri** | http://hdl.handle.net/2022/25967 | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **dc. description. abstract** | In November 2020, NSSE released the first of five data-informed stories in Engagement Insights—Survey Findings on the Quality of Undergraduate Education, detailing important and timely NSSE findings. This first release, Building a Sense of Community for All, examines the relationships between students' sense of belonging (an addition to the 2020 & 2021 surveys) with engagement, perceived gains, and persistence. This webinar—Do Your Students Feel They Belong? Examining Sense of Belonging and Engagement—discusses the importance of students' sense of belonging and how to examine belongingness within small populations. | en |
| **dc. language. iso** | en | en |
| **dc. publisher** | Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research | en |
| **dc. subject** | Student engagement | en |
| **dc. subject** | belonging | en |
| **dc. subject** | college and university | en |
| **dc. Title** | Do Your Students Feel They Belong? Examining Sense of Belonging and Engagement | en |
| **dc. title. alternative** | NSSE Annual Results 2020 Belonging Webinar | en |
| **dc. type** | Presentation | en |

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