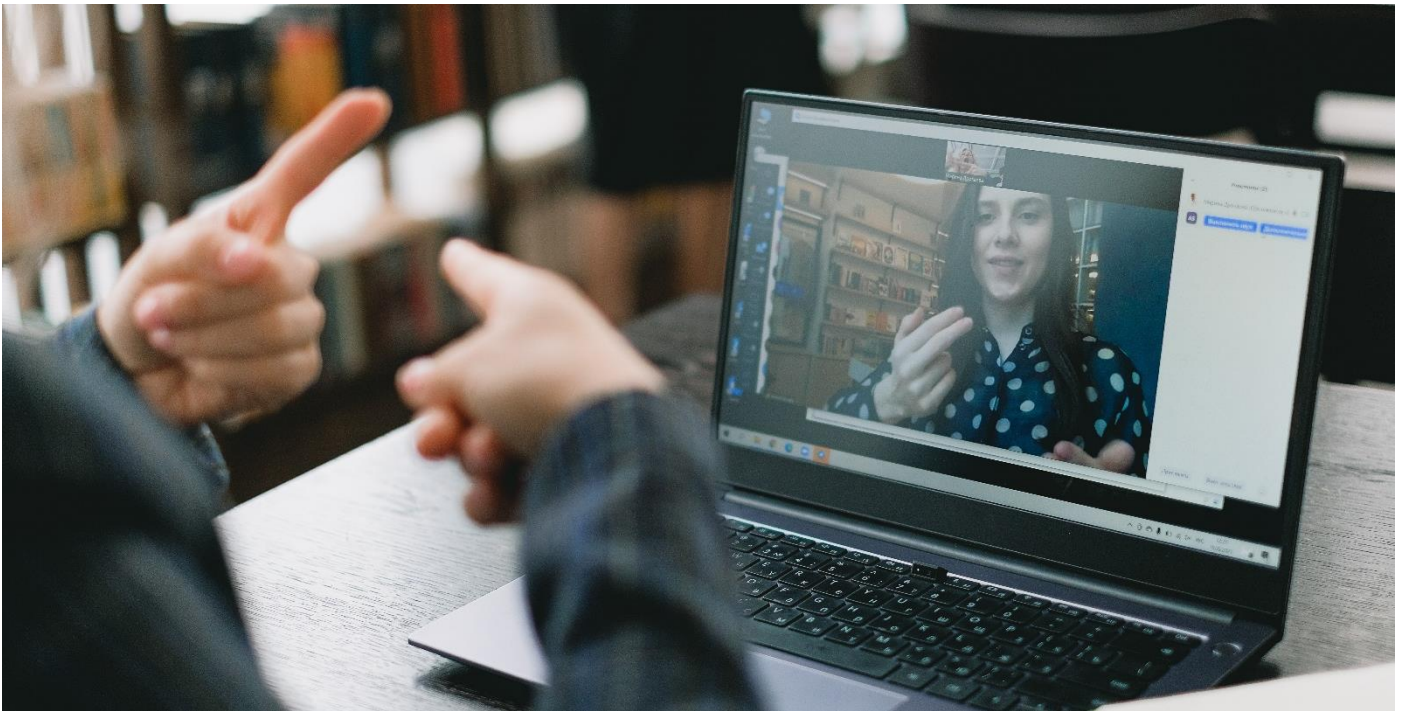


# Irish Independent

## Back To The ‘New Normal’; How The Easing Of Restrictions Is Affecting The Quality Of Life And Accessibility For Third Level Students With Disabilities



*Stock Photo<sup>1</sup>*



**Tuesday Medea Conroy**

March 24 2022 11:59 AM

---

Students across the country are returning to classes on a mostly in-person basis throughout second and third level education. Many students with disabilities are facing new challenges, and the return of old ones, as questions around disability access services arise.

---

<sup>1</sup> SHVETS production, ‘young lady learning sign language during online lesson with female tutor’ [online] <<https://www.pexels.com/photo/young-lady-learning-sign-language-during-online-lesson-with-female-tutor-7516363/>> [accessed 23 March 2022]

“The approach needs to be standardised” Bukky Adebowale, the USI VP for Equality and Citizenship says<sup>2</sup>, as services are being implemented, improved, removed, or kept post COVID-19. As student unions and organisations around the country strive to keep third level education accessible for all post lockdown, Adebowale makes it clear that efforts are being made to make sure students with disabilities do not fall through the cracks as restrictions are lifted.

Adebowale describes the USI’s work, in relation to students with disabilities, as “more internal”<sup>3</sup>, as the USI sit on various department bodies, such as the Department of Disability and the Department of Children, also working with local student unions and third level institutions, to make recommendations. Mainly, she describes the insights collected through an advisory group consisting of students with disabilities from across the country, as the advisory groups put forward ideas to inform the USI’s recommendations.

When asked about any particular thoughts brought forward by the advisory group, she mentioned a few issues, including concerns brought forward by those unable to wear masks, and how in many cases, mask exemptions were expected to be considered on a individual lecturer basis, and the approach was not standardised, as she explains “masks aren’t always as simple as that.” She briefly mentioned the issue of social life, as she described how the social lives of many with disabilities “has become non-existent in many cases.” “Students used to accessing a particular type of social life found the transition to online hard...” as she mentions the many different perspectives of students with all different types of disabilities.

She describes a new type of online learning being developed and discussed, described as “hybrid flexibility”, or “hiflex” for short. With this, students unable to attend in person classes would have the option to attend live online lectures, in which students could interact and engage with lecturers and classmates alike in a scheduled class time format. She makes clear the distinction between hiflex and blended learning, which is what is currently in place in many institutions, saying “hiflex and blended are different, blended is when some classes are online with others in person, and hiflex is something different and new.” When asked about how colleges might implement this she mentioned the UDL and the national access plan, and how adopting

---

<sup>2</sup> Adebowale, Bukky, Interview with Bukky Adebowale, USI VP for Citizenship and Equality (interviewed by Tuesday Medea Conroy for CA 2) (Dublin: Newswriting CA 2, 18 February 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Adebowale, Bukky (2022)

a universal approach to training, information, funding and resources are key, but how “it's hard when you're the only stakeholder on a board focusing on the students experience”.

*“The approach needs to be standardised- we need to adopt a universal approach to disability access.” -Bukky Adebowale USI VP for Equality and Citizenship.*

*“We're luck this didn't happen a decade ago.”,  
“Awareness has increased post Covid-19. That and the technology might have happened anyway, but it was all accelerated due to Covid-19. The technology available now is amazing.” -  
Colm Olwill, Assistive Technology Officer.*



*Stock Photo<sup>4</sup>*

Colm Olwill while speaking highly of hybrid or hiflex learning, clarifies that “it’s so mixed” and that “while there are big advantages, there’s also big disadvantages to it.”<sup>5</sup> Olwill, the Assistive Technology Officer in IADT, has been working with students with disabilities for over sixteen years, and has first-hand experience in how Covid-19 has had an effect on the technology and services available. While talking highly of the technology implemented during the first lockdown, with laptops and software made available to students due to an increase of funding, so much so that there’s still “lots in stock to access”, he speaks a bit more in detail about the kinds of software and tools accessible to students now, and how while Covid-19 may have “accelerated” the process, “..it might have happened anyway.”, in regards to the development of hybrid learning. “There’s something to be said about sharing screens [e.g. Blackboard and Teams], it’s a very focused way of learning, and with something like hiflex I could take over the student’s machine and their mouse, and show them how to do something or do something for them that they can’t.” “It’s much easier to

---

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Pabis, ‘Disability Marking on Asphalt Pavement’ [online] <<https://www.pexels.com/photo/disability-marking-on-asphalt-pavement-11074311/>> [accessed 23 March 2022]

<sup>5</sup> Olwill, Colm, Interview with Colm Olwill, Assistive Technology Officer (interviewed by Tuesday Medea Conroy for CA 3) (Dun Laoghaire, Dublin: Newswriting CA 3, 23 March 2022).

have repeat sessions one on one for fifteen minutes rather than stressing about in person attendance, short sessions, from my experience anyway, something like hybrid learning is really relaxed, and I might even end up seeing a student more”<sup>6</sup>

He goes on to discuss the disadvantages of hybrid, describing how mixed the issue is. “A huge part of the college experience is being in person, the animal sense of being in the same room as someone, picking up on their vibe and the atmosphere and engagement are all important parts of college.” He briefly talks about the removal of stresses like “the distractions, stressing about getting lunch, things like that, but they’re also part of the experience.”<sup>7</sup>

While the argument for online learning staying in place or being an option for those students with disabilities seems like a simple solution, AHEAD, or the Association for Higher Education Access & Disability’s survey on learning from home says otherwise. “Learning from Home During Covid-19: A Survey of Irish FET and HE Students with Disabilities” carried out in April 2020 shows that, out of just over six hundred students surveyed, more than half of the respondents either disagreed (35%) or strongly disagreed (17%) with the statement ‘I am coping well with learning from home’, with the highest percentage of negative reaction (disagree or strongly disagree) are those with a Mental Health Condition (67%), ADD/ADHD (62%) or a Specific Learning Difficulty (58%)<sup>8</sup>. Students from Higher Education undergraduate programs were significantly more likely to disagree or strongly disagree that they were coping well with learning from home than students in FET programmes.

Some of the main challenges reported include ‘Lack of structure to my day and motivation to learn’, ‘Distractions/other demands at home’, ‘Lack of clear communication from the college/centre of how I continue to engage in learning’, the ‘Reliability of my internet/internet shared with other members of household’ and ‘Disruption to the disability support provided to me by the college/centre’.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Olwill, Colm (2022)

<sup>7</sup> Olwill, Colm (2022)

<sup>8</sup> AHEAD, *Learning From Home During Covid-19: A Survey Of Irish FET And HE Students With Disabilities* (Blackrock, Dublin: AHEAD Educational Press, 2020) <<https://ahead.ie/Covid-19-student-report>> [Accessed 22 February 2022]

<sup>9</sup> AHEAD, *Learning From Home During Covid-19: A Survey Of Irish FET And HE Students With Disabilities* (2022)

While it's unclear how hiflex and other technologies will solve the problems disabled students are facing in a post-lockdown world, it is clear, that moves are being made to keep third level education as accessible as possible for all.

## **Bibliography**

Adebowale, Bukky, Interview with Bukky Adebowale, USI VP for Citizenship and Equality (interviewed by Tuesday Medea Conroy for CA 2) (Dublin: Newswriting CA 2, 18 February 2022).

AHEAD, *Learning From Home During Covid-19: A Survey Of Irish FET And HE Students With Disabilities* (Blackrock, Dublin: AHEAD Educational Press, 2020) <<https://ahead.ie/Covid-19-student-report>> [Accessed 22 February 2022]

Jacob Pabis, 'Disability Marking on Asphalt Pavement' [online] <<https://www.pexels.com/photo/disability-marking-on-asphalt-pavement-11074311/>> [accessed 23 March 2022]

Olwill, Colm, Interview with Colm Olwill, Assistive Technology Officer (interviewed by Tuesday Medea Conroy for CA 3) (Dun Laoghaire, Dublin: Newswriting CA 3, 23 March 2022).

SHVETS production, 'young lady learning sign language during online lesson with female tutor' [online] <<https://www.pexels.com/photo/young-lady-learning-sign-language-during-online-lesson-with-female-tutor-7516363/>> [accessed 23 March 2022]