

Lessons from the Pandemic: Supporting Student Engagement

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VENUE
Online Webinar for School
Leaders: Monaghan, Navan,
Clare and Tralee Education
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Impact of School Closures

- How have second-level schools responded and did access to digital resources impact on teaching and learning?
- To what extent have students engaged with distance learning? Do the additional pressures stemming from school closures fall disproportionately on already vulnerable groups?
- What lessons can be learned to support student engagement as schools reopen?

Research Methods

- A sequential explanatory mixed-method design - a two-stage design - analysis of quantitative data complemented with qualitative analyses (Creswell 2003).
- Combine the breadth of nationally representative survey data (1/3rd school leaders) with in-depth case study research, providing the ‘thick descriptions’ (Bridges, 2008) which offer valuable insights into impact across different school settings.

Response of Schools

Lack of time to prepare:

...the biggest problem here was the lack of information from the beginning. If I had two days' notice I would have had time to bring all students and staff up to speed on protocols around distance learning. Announcing that schools were closing at 11:30 am on the same day was ridiculous. (Survey Response, DEIS, Leinster excluding Dublin)

Response of Schools

The value of the social structure of school and informal contact between staff and students has become very clear in their absence:

School structure is what staff and parents and students are most familiar with and I have realised that teachers have a huge influence in the life of their students. Nothing replaces the traditional classroom setting. (Survey Response, Non-DEIS, Munster)

Response of Schools

Challenges for all, including teachers - many doubly affected

- as professionals they found themselves working from home at a job built around close contact
- and as parents they found themselves caring for their own children/parents while trying to teach others from a distance.

[Teachers] had their own kids at home, and they were struggling with trying to teach and likewise trying to mind their kids or in some cases trying to mind elderly parents. So, there was a lot of tension and you were dealing sometimes pastorally, sometimes academically. (Principal 1, Non-DEIS, Connacht)

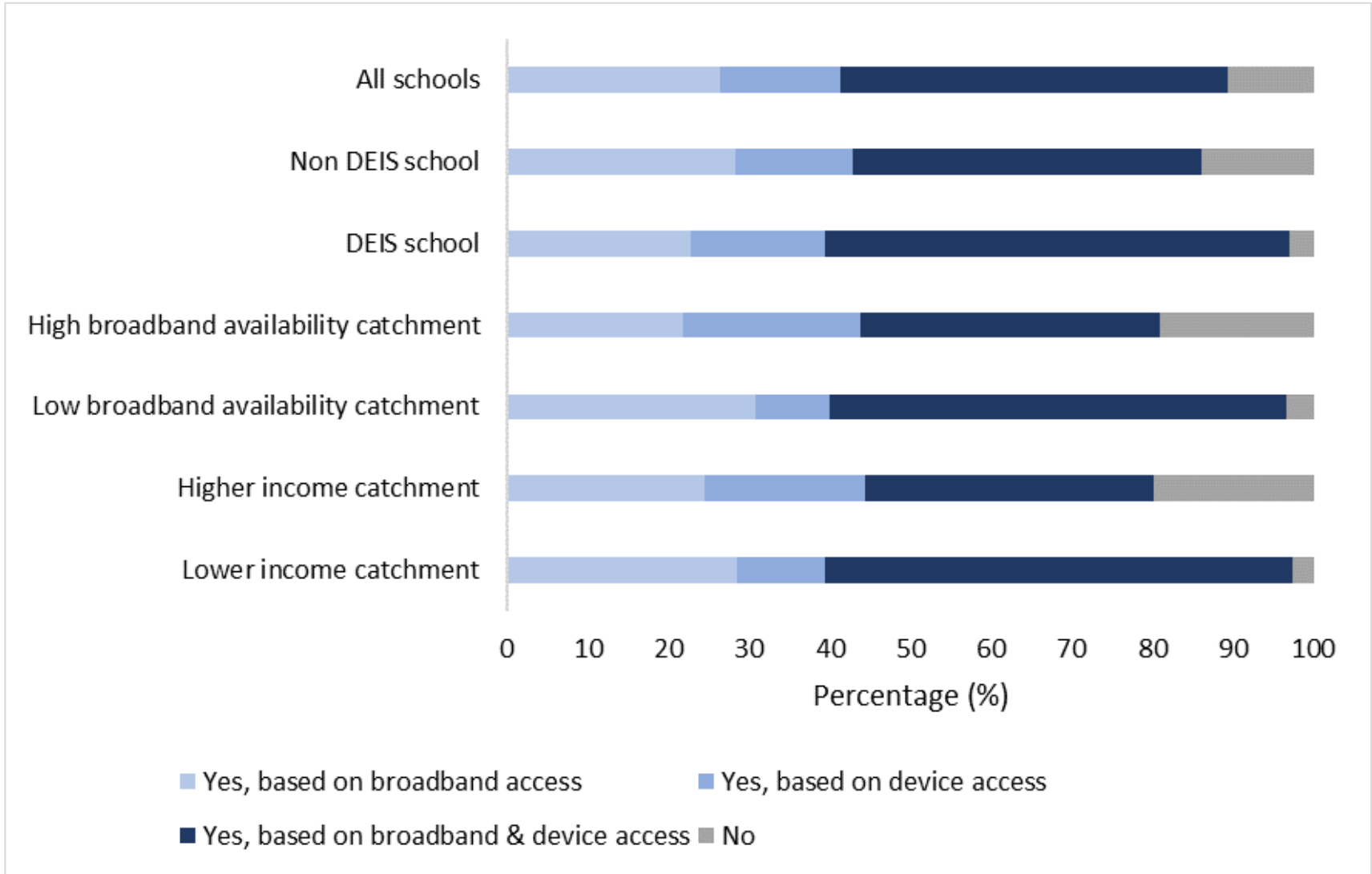
Response of Schools

That teachers are amazingly resilient and adaptable. Their capacity to keep the student at the heart of what they do has been inspirational. (Survey, Non-DEIS, Connacht)

But difficulty in maintaining staff morale and promoting staff wellbeing - sustainability of schools' efforts to provide distance learning:

...sustainability – I am a mother of 2-year-old twins, I have a school of just under 500 students – this is an insurmountable task of motivating, informing, communicating, contacting, planning, time in online meetings – constant anxiety... (Survey Response, DEIS, Leinster excluding Dublin)

Extent of Digital Divide



Why Focus on Student Engagement?

- Student engagement is a broad measure of how students are invested in their learning in diverse ways (Lei et al. 2018).
- It captures behavioural (Finn, 1993), emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004).
- Students emphasise the affective or emotional as well as the learning aspects of school life (Alexander, 2008).
- Linked to academic success (and a diversity of outcomes) and shown to particularly help disadvantaged populations (Finn, 1993).
- Student engagement is malleable (Turner et al., 2014).

What Shapes Student Engagement?

- Centrality of positive school climate & relationships, particularly teacher-student relationships (Pianta, 2012)
- Provision of clear and regular feedback to students found to increase engagement (Taylor & Parsons, 2011)
- Higher when learning tasks are variable, challenging and meaningful (Fredericks et al., 2016) and students appropriately challenged & supported (Shernoff et al, 2016)
- The use of ICT in the classroom found to enhance participation, allowing greater collaboration and the development of skills (McCoy et al., 2016)
- Non-academic activities also support belonging (Abbott-Chapman et al. 2014)

Student Engagement during the pandemic

- Student engagement is seen as particularly adversely impacted in DEIS schools, raising concerns over the potential longer-term impact on achievement and retention at DEIS schools.
- Impacted particularly severely on the capacity of students to engage with group work and practical work.
- Strongly negative impact for student with additional needs, cutting them off from vital school-based supports while also bringing new pressures to bear on them.

Student Engagement

The way teachers interact with their students matters

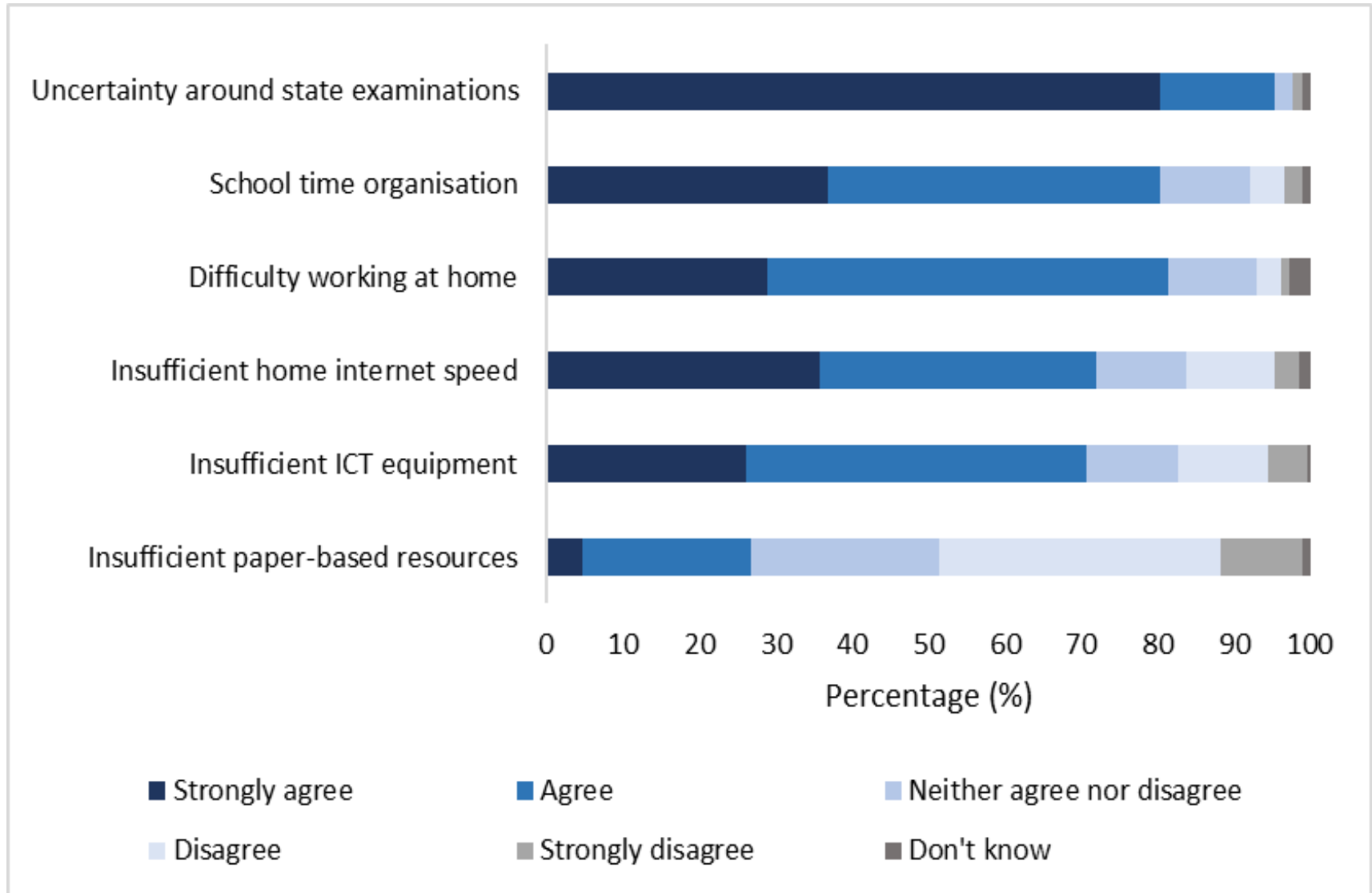
- Overall more interactive methods of presenting material & engaging with students online seen as more effective.
- Guidance to staff on online learning platforms and methods - often a suggestion for those struggling to adapt rather than a prescription for all teachers.
- Divergence over 'live' video classes delivered over Zoom, Microsoft Teams or Google Classroom in real time.
 - Some schools saw live classes as the gold standard for distance learning and encouraged teachers to offer them.
 - Others recommended limiting the number of live classes as they placed too great a burden on teachers & students.

Student Engagement

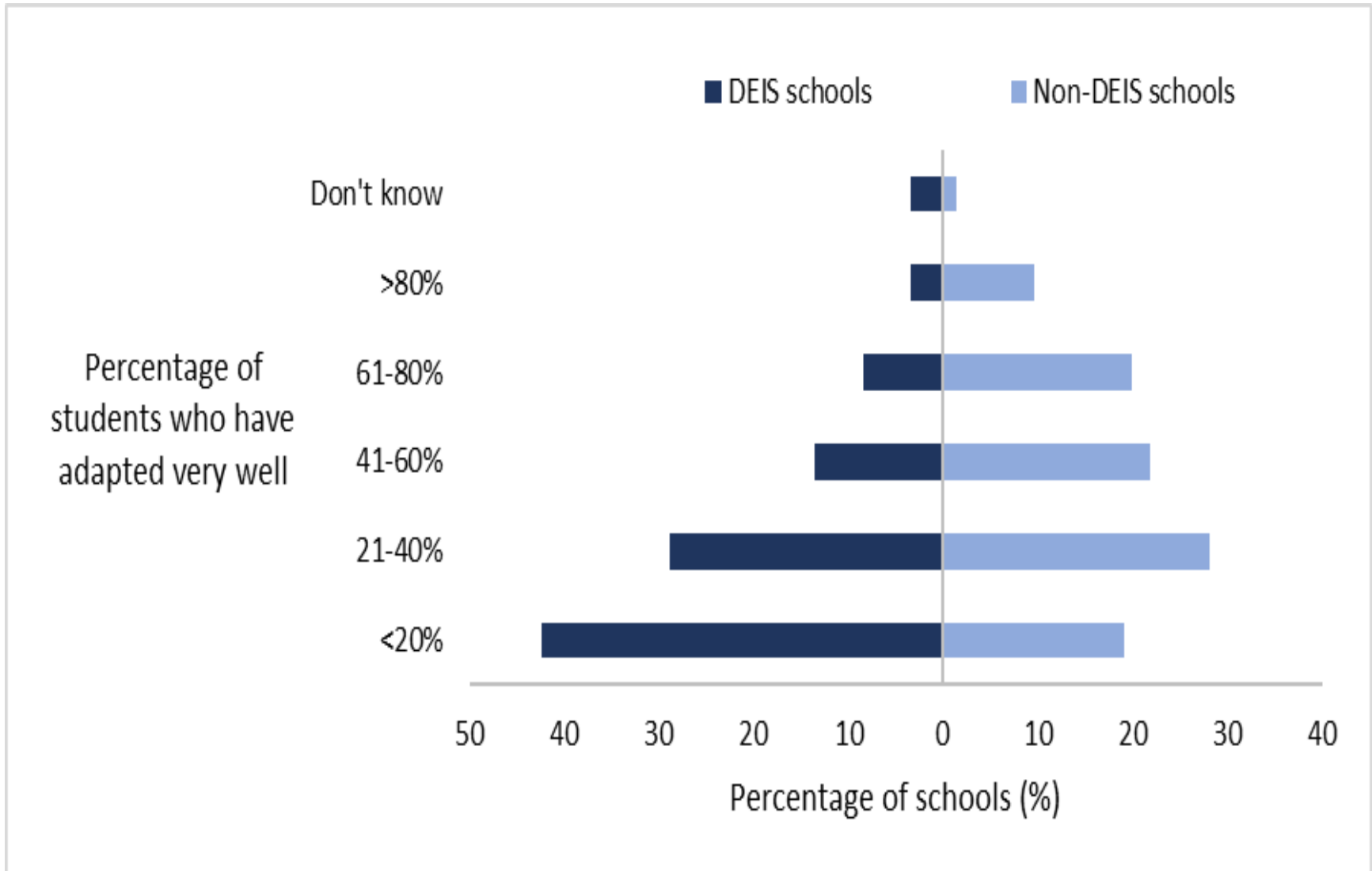
Impact of the Digital Divide

- Schools compensated – devices provided, work posted to students, mobile credit purchased.
- But impact on teaching - limited live interaction, contact with learners asynchronous and transactional.
- Student engagement more adversely affected among schools located in areas characterised by a lower coverage of high-speed broadband (internet access a constant worry).
- Partly explained by a lower probability of poorer student engagement among schools that deployed live online teaching in most classes.

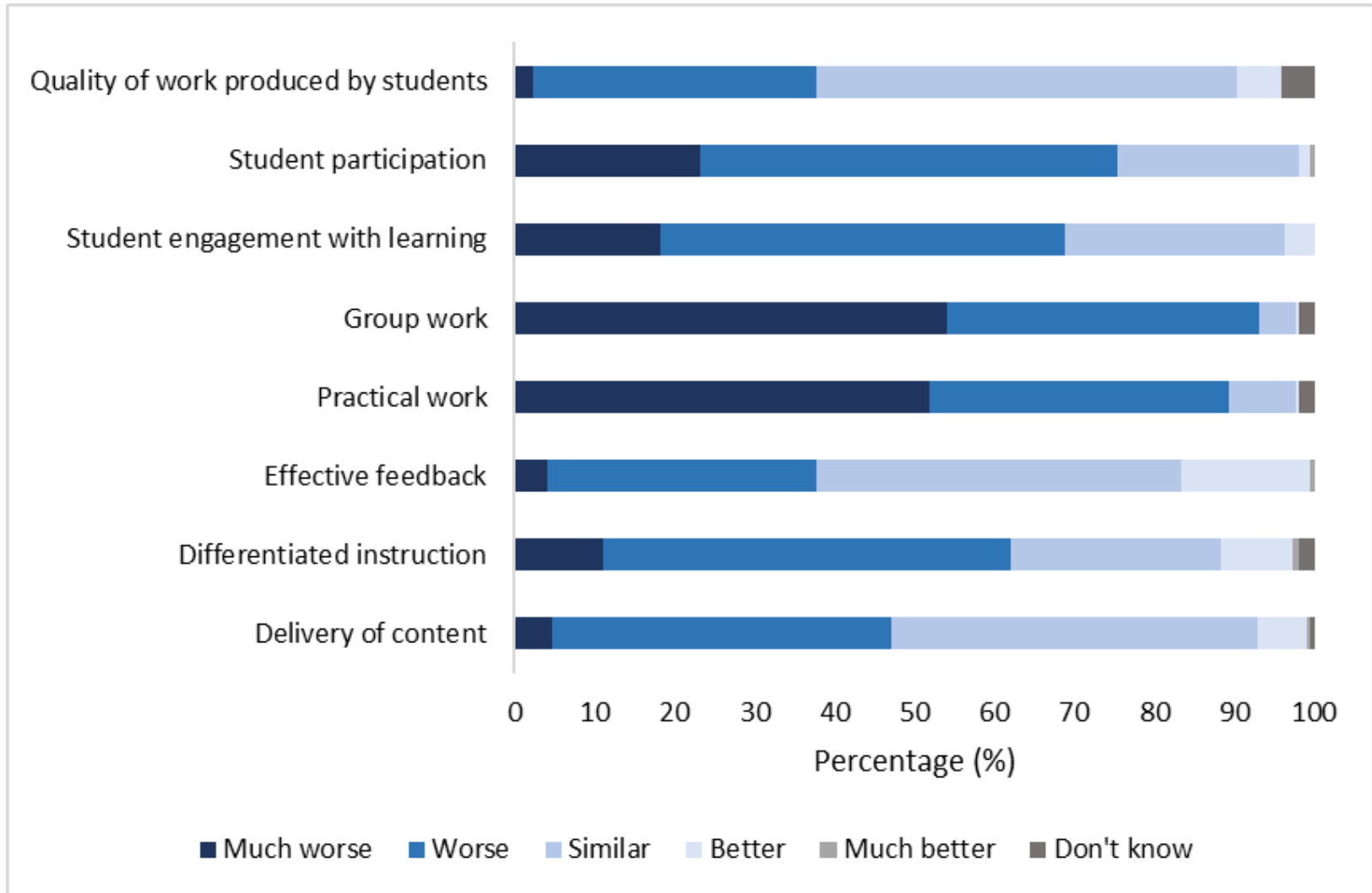
Challenges for Students



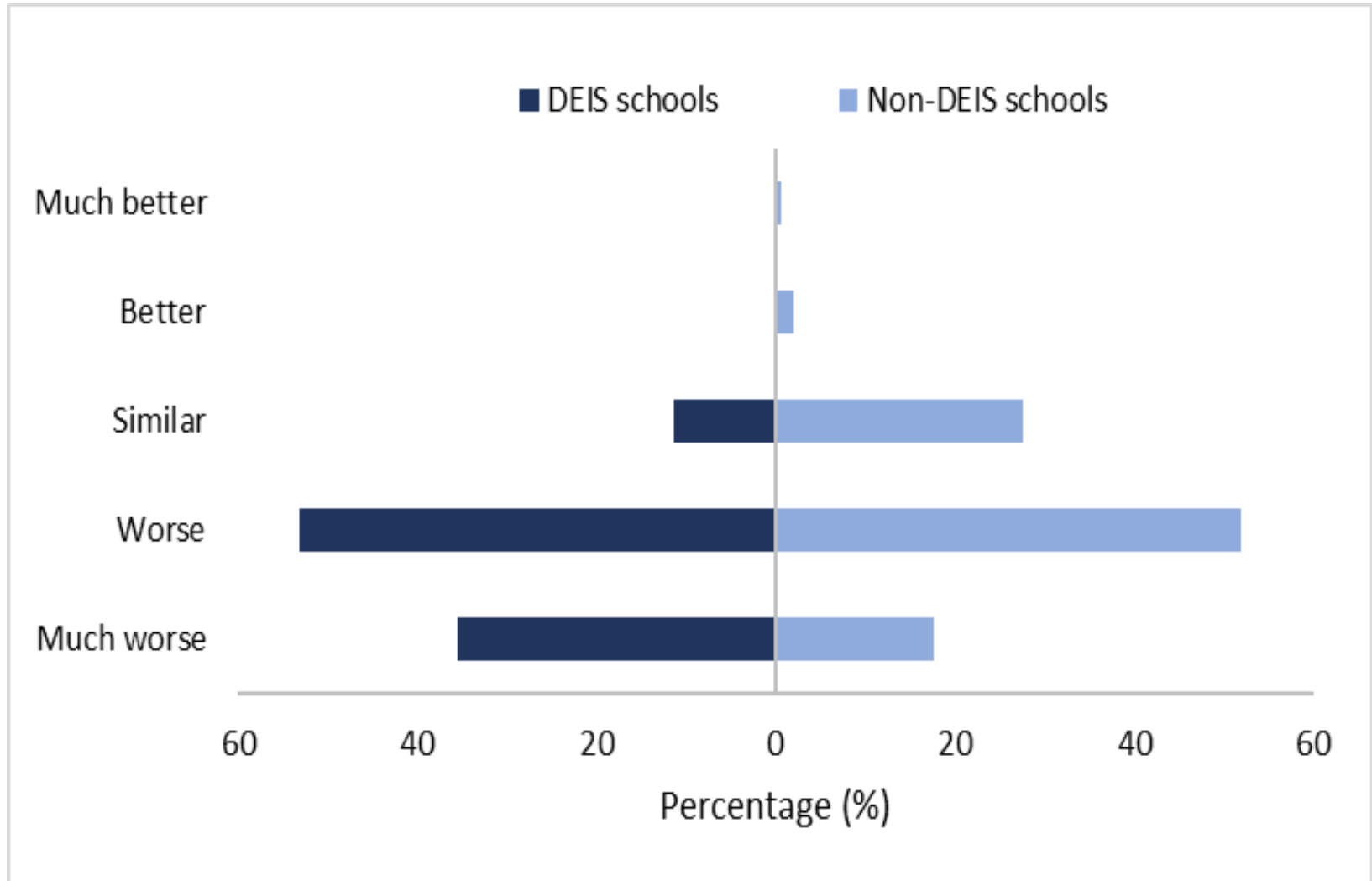
Student Adaptation



Distance Learning Vs Standard Practice



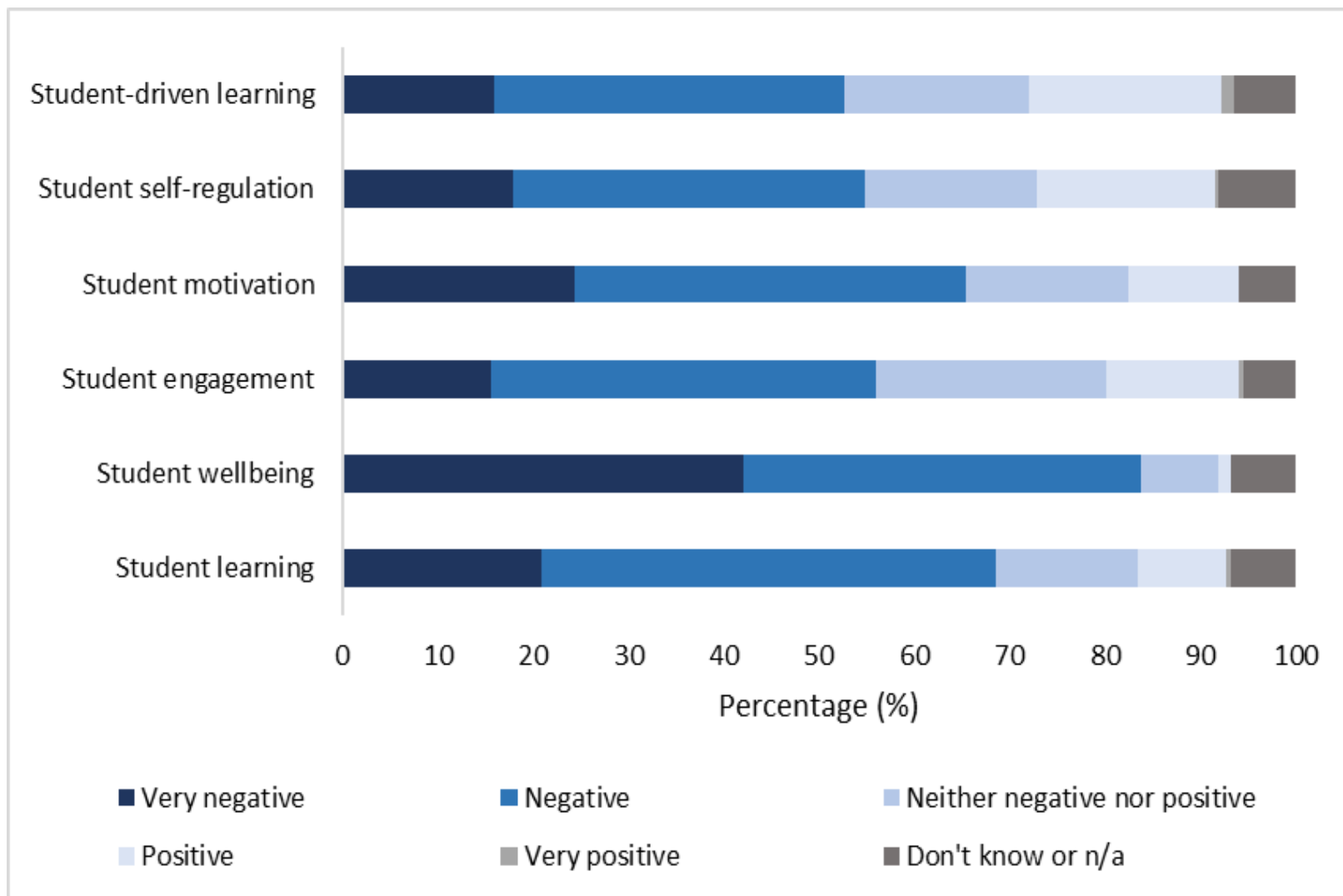
Student Attendance and Participation



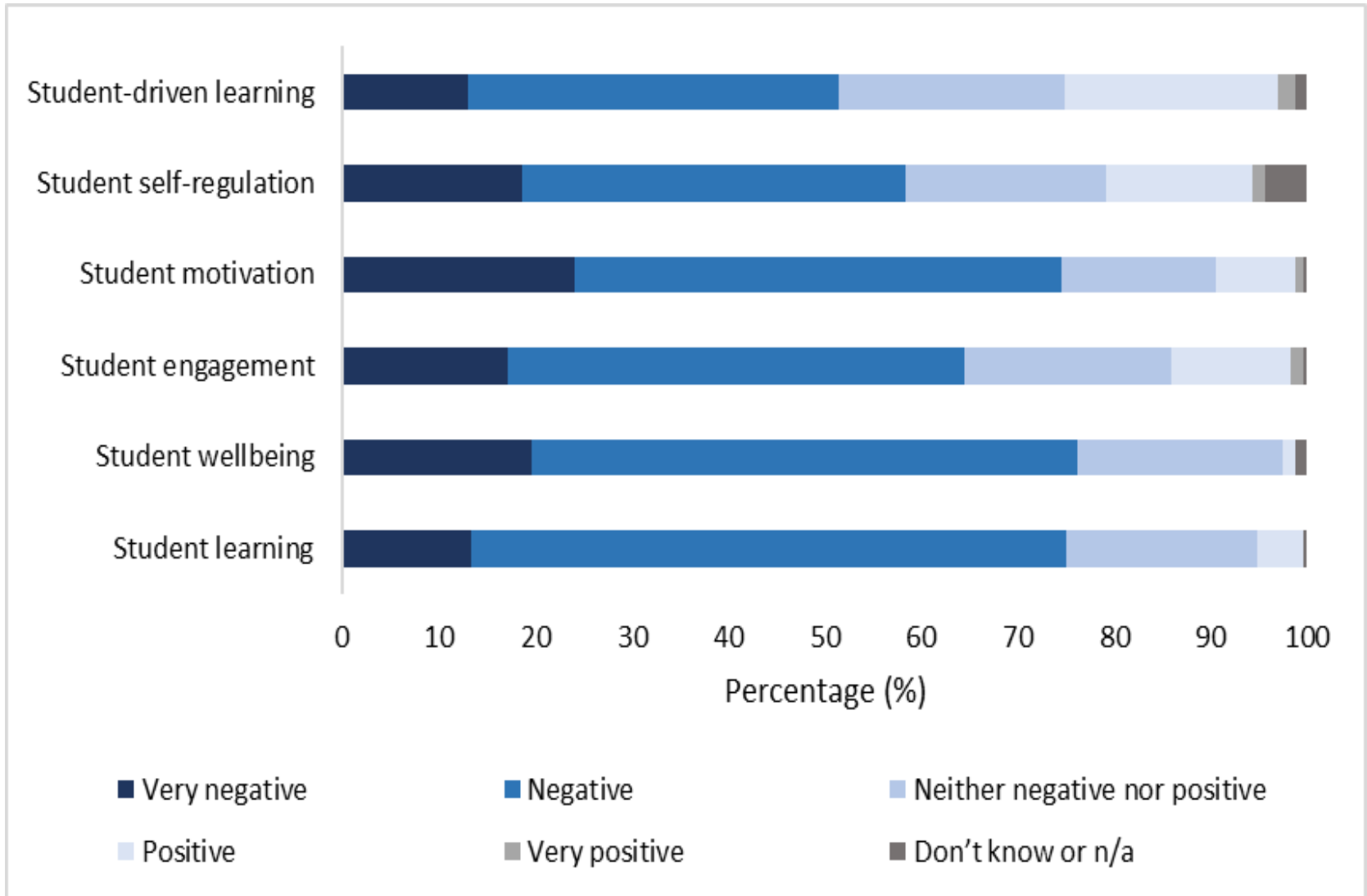
Student Engagement

- Among students with high intrinsic motivation, some schools reported an increase in self-regulated learning.
- Students who rely on extrinsic motivation - many of the extrinsic motivators disappeared.
 - Pull-factors which encourage school engagement like relationships with students and staff and non-academic school activities were lost.
 - Push-factors like repercussions for non-engagement were also reduced or removed by the closure of school buildings.
 - In the absence of these, student motivation became more dependent on their own intrinsic motivation, parental support and schools' attempts to reach out under the new conditions.

Impact on Leaving Certificate Students



Impact on Junior Certificate Students



Students with Additional Needs

- Without one-to-one contact and face-to-face interaction teachers struggled to provide the personalised instruction needed by students.
- Issues which indirectly affected students' engagement like the shock to students' routine and wellbeing also noted.
- Fears around negative impact on students' social skills and self-regulation.

Intersecting Barriers

- Students' capacity to engage was impacted by their home circumstances, their access to broadband and ICT and their own motivation, all of which impact on each other.
- Others result of longstanding social and educational issues - can only be ameliorated through further support for marginalised students and their families.

Learning from the Pandemic

Connection before content

- Strategies to support schools to re-establish the social context for learning, rebuild positive relationships for learning between teachers and students.
- The social dimension is vital in motivating students and to scaffold and support learning.
- Broader school activities – sports, music, drama – will be important in re-engaging students.
- Particularly important in DEIS schools where impact has been greatest.
- Also for students with additional needs, who were cut-off from vital school-based supports.

Learning from the Pandemic

Wellbeing

- Across all schools, a focus on wellbeing will be paramount as schools reopen.

Schools, no matter what medium, can be hubs of response and recovery, a place to support emotional recovery and promote social togetherness – and this is as important as achievement gains (John Hattie, 7 April 2020).

- Students and their teachers may be managing very real anxieties and trauma arising from the pandemic and the lengthy period of school building closures.

Targeted Supports

- Additional interventions to benefit the most vulnerable families might be delivered through the newly targeted DEIS programme.
- Home-school support systems will continue to assume importance in the coming period - HSCCL, the School Completion Programme, as well as school meals/breakfast clubs and other 'non-educational' supports (counselling, mentoring).

Learning from the Pandemic

Future school closures:

- Contingency plan in each school – a whole-school approach to support teachers in a planned and co-ordinated way.
- Maintaining a social presence for both teachers and students is important.
- Including the use of more interactive and collaborative approaches and, where possible, the use of video to maintain the human connection.
- Teachers should be equipped and supported in the use of (live) online teaching to address the motivational and affective needs of students.
- Students need to have the requisite skills to act in a more self-directed way. Importance of student voice.

Full report:

Learning for All? Second Level Education in Ireland During COVID-19

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<https://www.esri.ie/publications/learning-for-all-second-level-education-in-ireland-during-covid-19>

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