

Listening to the Experience of International Students in Ireland

Report of a Forum of International Students
held in the Mansion House, Dublin, on 14th November 2012

Co-ordinated by ICOS and USI



Acknowledgements

ICOS and USI would like to acknowledge all those who supported the forum and helped to make it happen. We would like to thank the Lord Mayor, Naoise Ó Muirí, for giving us the opportunity to host the event at the Mansion House in Dublin City Center.

We acknowledge with thanks the funding received from the Department of Education and Skills through the International Development Fund and the collaboration of Enterprise Ireland which allowed us to carry the Education in Ireland brand for the event.

Finally, special thanks are due to the International Students who participated in the forum and shared their views so openly.

Listening To International Students - Dublin Forum

Following on from February's "Listening to International Students" Forum in Cork, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and the Irish Council for International Students (ICOS) hosted a similar event in the Mansion House in Dublin on Wednesday, 14th November, 2012.

The forums recognise the importance of providing regular and genuine opportunities for international students to reflect on their own experience and to share their insights with those most interested in their wellbeing and welfare while they are in Ireland. The findings of the forums are intended to complement feedback from students gathered in other ways such as through student surveys. International student forums also support ICOS and USI to appropriately represent international students' views when it comes to policy development and improvements in student support services.

The forum was attended by 36 students from a variety of countries and provided a good chance to discuss issues of importance to their studies and overall experience in Ireland. Students from Champlain College, Dublin City University (DCU), Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Griffith College Dublin (GCD), International School of Business (ISB), National College of Ireland (NCI), National University of Ireland Maynooth (NUIM), Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and University College Dublin (UCD) attended. There was a mix of long and short term students studying from undergraduate to PhD level.

The forum, opened with a presentation by Councillor Clare Byrne, Deputy Lord Mayor of Dublin. She welcomed students to Dublin and spoke about the importance of their presence in the city. Next, the audience was addressed by Dutch student, Raouf Leeraar and Irish student, Elizabeth McDonnell. Raouf spoke about his study abroad experience here in Ireland – the benefits and the challenges. Elizabeth spoke about her Spanish study abroad experience and gave tips and advice for international students here in Ireland.

A world café style format gave attendees the opportunity to discuss issues in a supportive and relaxed environment and allowed participants the flexibility to move to different tables depending on their interest in a particular topic. The evening closed with a fun raffle with prizes sponsored by Education in Ireland followed by a reception and traditional Irish Music.

Feedback from students on the night was very positive. There was a great atmosphere in the Mansion house. Participants enjoyed having the opportunity to meet and engage with others who have had similar experiences. For many of the students it was their first opportunity to meet and socialise with other international students outside of their institution in Ireland. They also felt that their opinion was being valued especially as information gathered at the forum was to be used to assist with the creation of a training DVD for higher education staff.

Discussions on the night focused on Bridging Cultures – the integration of international students. It was divided into three sections:

1. Integrating into academic life
2. Integrating into campus life
3. Integrating into Irish life

1) Integrating academically

Students were asked if they had successfully integrated into academic life and if they were confident with their studies? The majority of students felt that it took them a while to settle into the Irish academic system but as time passed they became increasingly confident with their academic work. A minority of students felt that they were not confident because the course was more difficult than they were prepared for, their language ability held them back or there was more course work than they were prepared for.

Students made a number of recommendations to assist with their integration into academic life. Firstly, it was suggested that institutions should ensure that learning materials are accessible to students through Moodle, Blackboard, etc. Secondly, institutions should offer students extra English classes. Finally, lecturers should have designated office hours when they are available to students who wish to discuss an academic issue. Many of the students at the forum, however, commented on the general approachability of lecturers in Irish higher level institutions.

The confidence level of international students can also be boosted by ensuring that information is clear and explicit, that important concepts and values in Irish academic life are introduced to students at an early stage and that cultural differences are valued.

'At the start I was not really confident with my studies. Sometimes I am not sure about the way to do things. The teaching is really different. However the lecturers are very approachable'

'It is clear now but there was a lot to figure out'

'Teaching is sometimes very different than what I am used to'

2) Integrating into campus life

Attendees felt that integrating into campus life was assisted mostly by the international office and students union. The international offices made it possible for students to meet other international students. This was done through orientation, trips and events. Easy access to information on college websites and brochures also contributed to making settling in easier.

A positive point, acknowledged by all, was the large number of clubs and societies. International students found these clubs and societies a great way to meet and interact with Irish students and they enjoyed getting involved in something they already had an interest in or indeed taking on a new challenge.

A number of students who attended smaller institutions were critical of the limited opportunities available to meet other students during their study experience. In general, also, smaller institutions could not host clubs and societies. This was felt to be a major disadvantage and the isolation made students feel like they were not getting the most out of their study abroad experience. The same students really valued the forum as it was their first time to meet with other students in the Dublin area. Some of the students suggested that the smaller institutions should explore the creation of links with each other to widen the social opportunities for their students and generally enhance their experience.

Despite opportunities for integration, some students felt that there was a divide between students on campus. Domestic students, international students and Erasmus students rarely had the opportunity to meet each other. International Offices tended to organise separate events for the international and Erasmus students. Students stated that they would have a preference for events to which all students were invited.

The following quotations capture the views of students:

'I am doing my masters in computing and there is only one Irish student in the class'

'The college should gather all students together and give them orientation'

'Would have love to have an overview of societies, because there are so many and seem very interesting'

3) Integrating into Irish Life

During the discussion it became apparent that international students are very keen to integrate into Irish life but it has its challenges. Attendees felt that Irish people are very friendly and amicable. However, the students found that they were more acquaintances than friends. It was difficult to develop solid relationships.

'Irish people are warm and friendly. They are helpful but it is very hard to interact with them as they are more involved in themselves'

Some of the students are having great success integrating into Irish life. This is due to volunteering modules provided by a number of the institutions present. The students noted numerous benefits aside from gaining work experience, the students are meeting a new group of people, they are getting an insight into the Irish workplace and they are developing another support network in Ireland.

'Our college offers a module that you can choose to do volunteering work. I found it quite helpful through doing the volunteer work to know the country, culture and people.'

Students noted that language was often a large barrier. Often students are too shy to communicate with Irish people. Also, the language barrier can cause confusion for students in everyday life, for example, asking for directions. Students felt that the Irish accents obstruct their understanding of the language.

'Street names and moving around can be difficult'

The food and drinking culture is a major aspect that the students find difficult to adapt to as it is different than what they are used to. It became apparent that many of the students present were not comfortable with the drinking culture in Ireland and found that if they were not involved in it they would not be able to socialise with their Irish peers. It was noted that if they are a member of a club or society many of the social events linked with the club involve drinking.

The following quotes summarise the feelings:

'Not just here to study language but to know a different culture and different people'.

'Irish culture class would be perfect'

'College should offer more local trips to help us know the country better.'

Summary of Student Recommendations:

- Peer assistance would ensure that international students would have an identified person, easy to approach should they have a question
- Integration should be promoted in lectures, for example, by having more discussion based activities, academic groups
- Extra classes should be provided for international students to assist them with course content and/or language issues.
- Cultural training should be provided to all students
- The campus should celebrate diversity, including, events and the arts.
- Encourage home students to get involved in international activities and stay around at the weekends
- Detailed orientation and pre-arrival information for all students with assist them with the integration process. This should include campus and city tours.

Appendix 1

College	Country
Champlain College	America
Dublin City University	Brazil
Dublin Institute of Technology	China
Griffith College Dublin	Colombia
International School of Business	France
National College of Ireland	Greece
National University of Ireland, Maynooth	India
Trinity College Dublin	Ireland
University College Dublin	Japan
	Netherlands
	South Africa
	Spain
	Taiwan