



**Submission to the Joint Oireachtas
Committee on Education, Further and
Higher Education, Research,
Innovation and Science on the Future
Funding of Higher Education in Ireland**

May 2022

About the Irish Council for International Students (ICOS)

This submission is made on behalf of the Irish Council for International Students (ICOS). ICOS' is an independent advocacy organisation whose mission is to protect the rights of international students, and to contribute to a healthy and vibrant international education sector in Ireland which has the quality of the student experience at its centre.

ICOS has 27 members, including all 10 universities in the Republic of Ireland, many of the Institutes of Technology and all the major independent third level colleges. Our membership also includes the Union of Students in Ireland (USI).

ICOS' values include consultation, professionalism, collaboration and learning. Our goals are to influence policy and standards in international education; build the capacity of our members; empower international students to pursue their rights; and support and showcase the important contribution of international education to international development.

1. Introduction

ICOS welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Future Funding of Higher Education in Ireland. Despite being valuable contributors to the economy, society, and higher education, international students are too often only viewed in financial terms, and their concerns are frequently overlooked due to them having no voting rights beyond the local elections. ICOS believes that publicly funded universities in Ireland should be made free for all, and that no distinction should be made between students' nationalities.

2. Overreliance on International Student Fees

For more than a decade, there has been an overreliance on international student fees to make up for the funding shortfall in higher education. The pandemic has served to highlight the overdependence on international students, and the long-term unsustainability facing Irish universities as they must seek funding from alternative sources to offset insufficient State funding. Indeed, Ireland's current spending on higher education is just 0.9% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP); which is considerably lower than the OECD average of 1.4%.¹ This has given way to higher student to staff ratios, lower funding per student, and less access to student support services, which in turn, has affected Irish universities' performance in the university world rankings.

3. Benefits of Internationalisation

Internationalisation of higher education brings with it valuable societal gains for everyone. It provides international students with an opportunity to study in Ireland, it contributes to making Irish students more global citizens, and enhances Ireland's economy and talent pool. International students enrich the Irish higher education system and contribute significantly to

¹ OECD, Resourcing higher education in Ireland – Funding higher education institutions

Irish society, the economy, as well as to research. When students return to their country of origin, they serve as ‘ambassadors’ for Ireland forming part of the Global Irish.² Many international students also remain in the State after graduation to work and contribute to the Irish economy.

4. International Student Perspective

Obtaining a qualification from an Irish university represents a significant private benefit for international students. However, non-EEA international students are subject to paying significantly higher course fees than other students, in some cases, in excess of €50,000 per year. Little consideration appears to be given to non-EEA students who come from the Global South and must save for years, borrow, or take out considerable loans to study in Ireland. There is a growing sentiment amongst some non-EEA students that they are viewed as ‘cash cows’ to support the Irish higher education system, and their concerns are not taken seriously. ICOS’ International Student Report 2021 identified multiple challenges facing international students studying in Ireland including accessing employment, racism, and accommodation.³

4.1 Pathways to Employment

Many international students choose Ireland because of employment opportunities, and while the State’s external review of the last International Education Strategy deemed that the Third Level Graduate Programme (TLGP) has been successful, findings from ICOS’ International Student Report 2021 would suggest otherwise.⁴ A notable issue highlighted in the research was that the TLGP is not well known to employers leading to difficulties securing graduate level employment. Considering the global competitiveness to attract international students, and the investment that students make to study in Ireland, this does not reflect well on the TLGP. It is also worth noting that the UK, Australia and New Zealand all have more attractive graduate visas than Ireland.

4.2 Racism

The findings from ICOS’ research found disconcertingly high levels of racism and crime directed towards international students; 50% of participants in the research said they had experienced or witnessed racism while in Ireland with a mere 5% saying they reported the incident. Urgent action is needed to address racism in Ireland, including appropriate steps taken by publicly funded universities to ensure that policies are in place to deal with racism on campus.

4.3 Accommodation

Another key finding that surfaced in ICOS’ research relates to overcrowded accommodation. Despite having the lowest rates of overcrowding in Europe, Ireland’s lack of available

² Global Ireland: Ireland’s Diaspora Strategy 2020–2025

³ International Student Report 2021: Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Overall International Student Experience in Ireland

⁴ Indecon (2020) International Education Strategy Review

affordable accommodation leaves many international students with no other option but to live in overcrowded conditions.⁵ In 2022, the student accommodation crisis has become increasingly more alarming with recent reports of students being forced to sleep rough.⁶ It is clear that legislative action is needed to tackle overcrowding and that funding must be allocated to build affordable purpose-built student accommodation.

4.4 Health Insurance

It is an immigration requirement for non-EEA students to hold medical insurance in order to ensure that they are not a burden on the State. However, since the Health Insurance Authority (HIA) ruled that international students on courses of more than one academic year are considered 'ordinarily resident', health insurance has become more expensive for international students and the type of insurance required for immigration purposes is no longer clear.

4.5 Mental Health & Wellbeing Supports

One of the very real challenges of online learning from an international student perspective is that it limits the face-to-face and social interactions that students seek. At the time of ICOS' research, 79% of international students studying in higher education said their mental health had suffered as a result of the pandemic. Enhanced funding to improve mental health and wellbeing supports must be prioritised to ensure that students studying in a hybrid learning environment have adequate access to these vital services.

4.6 PhD Students

For many non-EEA PhD students, the stipend they receive is not enough to cover the cost of living in Ireland and the impossibility for their spouses to engage in employment makes it even more challenging to get by. The barriers PhD students encounter during and after completion of their degree leads students to seek employment in other countries. This is concerning given that Ireland invests in many of these skilled students through stipends and scholarships, and raises questions about diversity and inclusion in the Irish higher education system.

5. Future Funding Model for Higher Education

The government's recent commitment to invest €307 million of additional funding in Irish higher education is a welcome announcement; yet, it falls some way short of the €600 million in annual investment as recommended in the Cassell's Report. ICOS believes that publicly funded universities in Ireland should be made free for all, and that no distinction should be made between students' nationalities. Within the European Union, there are examples, such as, Norway and Germany, where publicly funded universities are free, or low cost, for all students, including international students. It is also worth noting that international students already make a significant economic impact through their non-tuition fee expenses alone,

⁵ Eurostat (2020) Is your home too crowded? Eurostat, European Commission

⁶ Irish Examiner (2022) International students sleeping on the streets due to accommodation crisis

such as, accommodation and living expenses, which has been estimated to be worth close to €120 million annually to Ireland's economy.⁷

A fully funded public university system could also help contribute towards the State's commitment to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and in particular reach those furthest behind.⁸ This would allow greater opportunities to facilitate free higher education opportunities for citizens from the Global South, as well as refugees and asylum seekers, particularly, in areas that go towards achieving the SDGs, via grants, bursaries, and scholarships.

6. Conclusion

The pandemic has exposed the level of under-investment in higher education in Ireland, and the unsustainability of relying upon non-EEA international student course fees as a means of alleviating the financial pressure on Irish universities. It is evident that failure to address this issue poses a serious threat to both Ireland's reputation as a global education destination as well as the overall quality of higher education in this country. The experience of collaborating with international students should not be underestimated, nor should the part that international students play in Irish higher education, research, society, and the economy. However, the current funding model of Irish universities, coupled with the challenges outlined in this submission, and high course fees for non-EEA citizens, could have long-term adverse consequences for higher education in Ireland unless real action is taken and investment increases to the level set out in the Cassell's Report.

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⁷ Indecon (2019) Independent Assessment of the Economic and Social Impact of Irish Universities

⁸ A Better World – Ireland's Policy for International Development