



**Submission to the Department of
Children, Equality, Disability, Integration
and Youth on the Public Consultation for
a new Migrant Integration Strategy**

November 2023

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 and enhance the rights of international students in Ireland while championing their contribution in the places they study and the communities in which they live. ICOS has 26 institutional members, including all of the universities and technological universities in the Republic of Ireland, many independent third level colleges, and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI). ICOS' values include: consultation, collaboration, learning, and accountability, and 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.

Introduction

ICOS welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth on a new Migrant Integration Strategy for Ireland. Ireland has become a highly diverse and multi ethnic society. Census 2022 revealed that the number of non-Irish citizens living in Ireland accounted for 12% of the population.¹ Part of this influx can be attributed to significant growth in the number of international students choosing to study here over the last decade. Similar to other migrants, international students are made up of a diverse cohort of people from different backgrounds, cultures, and faiths. With many having different reasons, ambitions, and goals for coming to Ireland. For example, some international students come to Ireland to pursue studies on a short-term basis. Others choose to study in Ireland to develop new skills and further their career development in their home countries. Many international students also remain in the State after graduation to work and contribute to the Irish economy, and for some, being an international student is their first step on their journey to long-term residency, and citizenship. Yet, despite being important contributors to the workforce, economy, society, and higher education, international students are too often only viewed in economic terms, and their needs and concerns are frequently overlooked. Moreover, ICOS has found that international students, particularly those from non-EEA countries, confront significant barriers that impact on their integration.

Employment

International students are important contributors to the Irish labour market, both during and on completion of their studies. Many work as carers, cleaners, and in the service industry while they study, and later progress on to full-time employment. However, ICOS has observed that international students, particularly non-EEA students on a Stamp 2 visa, frequently work

¹ Central Statistics Office, Census of Population 2022: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cpsr/censusofpopulation2022-summaryresults/migrationanddiversity/>

in precarious conditions. The rising cost of living has placed additional pressures on students to sustain themselves. Many non-EEA students on a Stamp 2 visa, who are only permitted to work 20 hours per week (except during the Christmas and summer holiday periods), are having to work additional hours illegally to get by. The 'gig economy', such as the food delivery industry, has provided an outlet for some to make extra money, but this employment is not secure and places international students in jeopardy of being exploited.

The Third Level Graduate Programme (TLGP) permits non-EEA students who have completed a Level 8 or 9 qualification in an Irish higher education institute to remain in Ireland to work full-time for up to 24 months. While an external review of Ireland's International Education Strategy 2016-2020 deemed that the TLGP had been successful, findings from ICOS' International Student Report 2021 would suggest otherwise.² The research found that students studying in higher education encountered significant difficulty accessing work in their area of studies when they graduate. For some, this led to deskilling, underemployment and precarious work.³

Housing

Pressures brought about by the housing crisis have seriously affected migrants, including international students. In 2023, ICOS carried out an Accommodation Survey of International Students to better understand and highlight the challenges that international students were facing due to the housing crisis.⁴ ICOS' research found that international students are experiencing significant repercussions as a result of the housing crisis which is negatively impacting on their health, wellbeing, education, and experience in Ireland. Despite having among the lowest rates of overcrowding in Europe, the acute shortage of affordable accommodation in Ireland often leaves international students with no other option but to live in overcrowded, cramped, and sub-standard accommodation that is failing to meet minimum standards for rented housing.⁵ A key finding that surfaced from the research revealed that one in twenty international students said that they had received an offer of free accommodation in exchange for sex, or that they had seen a room being advertised in exchange for sexual favours.

Political Representation

Similar to other migrants from non-EEA countries, international students from outside of the European Union have little political capital in Ireland due to having no voting rights beyond

² Indecon (2020) International Education Strategy Review:

https://www.indecon.ie/assets/files/pdf/international_education_strategy_review.pdf

³ International Student Report (2021): https://www.internationalstudents.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2021-12/ICOS%20International%20Student%20Report%202021_Final.pdf

⁴ Accommodation of International Students (2023): https://www.internationalstudents.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2023-11/ICOS_Accommodation_Survey_2023.pdf

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

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20210105-1>

the local elections. The absence of migrant representation in Irish politics is reflected in the lack of diversity in the Oireachtas. There is also a distinct shortage of diversity in local politics, with just nine out of 949 local councillors across Ireland coming from a migrant background. ICOS notes that since the last Migrant Integration Strategy was launched that local authorities have made some progress in relation to the integration of migrant communities in their programming and external services. However, the same progress has not been made in terms of internal structures, such as staffing or diversity.⁶ Ensuring political representation is essential to fostering successful integration; migrants must continue to be encouraged and supported to register to vote and actively participate in local elections.

Racism

The prevalence of racism in Irish society has been greatly exposed over the last number of years. ICOS has been vocal in highlighting the racism experienced by international students. Findings from research conducted by ICOS in 2021 found disconcertingly high levels of racism and crime directed towards international students. With 40% of participants in the research saying they had experienced or witnessed racism while in Ireland with only 5% saying they reported the incident.⁷ A further investigation into international students' experience of racism in Ireland saw the number of people who said they had witnessed or experienced racism in Ireland rise to 63%.⁸ One of the main findings from this research revealed that international students were targeted for speaking in their native language. The findings also showed that those who suffered racism did not report the racist incident because they did not have faith in the Gardaí to take action. The riots in Dublin on 23 November 2023 are a stark reminder that anti-migrant sentiments are a significant issue in Ireland, and the rise of the far-right must be taken seriously. Urgent action is needed to address racism in this country including the enactment of the Criminal Justice (Incitement to Violence or Hatred and Hate Offences) Bill.

Education & Awareness

ICOS believes that education has a critical role to play in facilitating integration. For example, there needs to be more diversity among educators across the Irish education system. A key action towards creating a more inclusive society is through the development and implementation of an educational curricula that highlights and values diversity of other nationalities, culture, languages, and traditions. The State should fund projects that promote intercultural and education initiatives that foster equality, diversity, and inclusion. Additionally, organisations such as ICOS provide important information and advice supports

⁶ Immigrant Council of Ireland, Indicators for Migrant Local Integration (2022):

<https://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/sites/default/files/2022-11/IMCI%20Report%20Final.pdf>

⁷ ICOS, International Student Report (2021): https://www.internationalstudents.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2021-12/ICOS%20International%20Student%20Report%202021_Final.pdf

⁸ ICOS, Speak Out Against Racism (2023): https://www.internationalstudents.ie/sites/default/files/media/file-uploads/2023-03/Speak%20Out%20Against%20Racism_Final.pdf

to migrants. Yet, unlike other similar organisations, ICOS currently does not receive any dedicated State funding for this work. Finally, establishing mechanisms for dialogue and mediation to address conflicts that arise between different communities could help to overcome barriers to integration.

Conclusion

Migrant Integration brings with it valuable societal gains and helps to build stronger, more inclusive, communities. International students enrich both the Irish education system and wider society. They contribute to making Ireland a more globally outlook, diverse, and vibrant place to live. As migrant integration is a dynamic process that is constantly evolving, the new Migrant Integration Strategy must have clear targets, outcomes, be adequately resourced, and continuously monitored. However, the true success of the Strategy will rest on collaboration across all stakeholders - national and local government, civil society, educational institutions, and local and migrant communities.

ICOS proposes the following recommendations:

- Enact the Criminal Justice (Incitement to Violence or Hatred and Hate Offences) Bill;
- Increase representation of non-Irish communities in politics and deliver awareness raising campaigns to encourage non-EEA citizens to vote in local elections;
- Ensure that local authorities are adequately resourced to deliver integration projects and combat abuses in the private rental market;
- Significantly increase the diversity of An Garda Síochána to reflect the diversity in Irish society;
- Significantly increase the diversity of educators in primary, secondary, and third level education to reflect the diversity in Irish society;
- Improve pathways to employment for non-EEA international students and graduates;
- Promote intercultural and education initiatives that foster equality, diversity, and inclusion;
- Develop and implement educational curricula that highlight and value the diversity of other nationalities, culture, languages, and traditions;
- Establish mechanisms for dialogue and mediation to address conflicts that arise between different communities;
- Establish a steering group to oversee implementation of the new strategy.

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