

International Student Report 2021:

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic
and the Overall International
Student Experience in Ireland

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About ICOS

The Irish Council for international Students (ICOS) is an independent advocacy organisation, whose mission is to protect the rights of international students, and to contribute to a vibrant international education sector in Ireland which has the quality of the student experience at its centre. ICOS has thirty institutional members, including all of the universities in the Republic of Ireland, many of the Institutes of Technology and all 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.

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Foreword

This report is a snapshot in time of international students' experiences in Ireland and follows on from ICOS' 2020 survey. ICOS is particularly grateful to all the students who took part in our research and who participated in the focus groups. The findings in this report and the recommendations should be used to improve the international student experience in Ireland.

ICOS hopes that this report will inform policy and the next Government strategy on international education. Many thanks to Brian Hearne, ICOS' Communications and Programme Officer, and to Pilar Luz Rodrigues, ICOS' Research and Project Assistant, for their expertise and work on this report.

Laura Harmon,
ICOS Executive Director



Acknowledgement

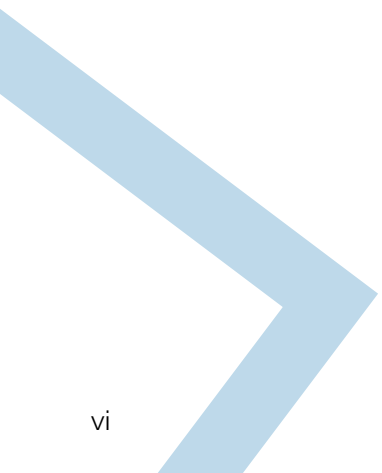
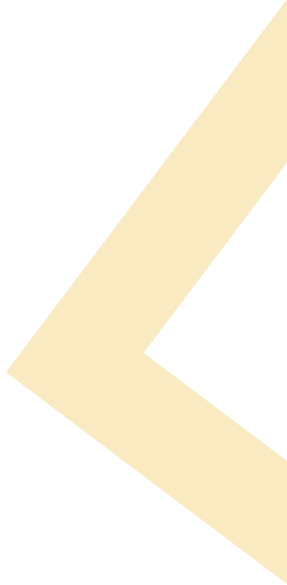

ICOS would like to express our gratitude to all of the international students who took time to participate in the international student survey and focus groups. Without their valuable insights, perspectives, and experiences as international students in Ireland, this report would not be possible. We would also like to extend a special thank you to the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education for funding this research, as part of the project "Next Steps for Teaching and Learning: Moving Forward Together".



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List of Abbreviations

EEA – European Economic Area

ELS – English Language Students

EU – European Union

GNIB - Garda National Immigration Bureau

HEI – Higher Education Institution

ICOS – Irish Council for International Students

IEM – International Education Mark

ILEP – Interim List of Eligible Programmes

INAR – Irish Network Against Racism

INIS – Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service

IRP – Irish Residence Permit

NAPAR – National Action Plan Against Racism

PPSN – Personal Public Service Number

QQI – Quality and Qualifications Ireland

TLGP – Third Level Graduate Programme

Executive Summary

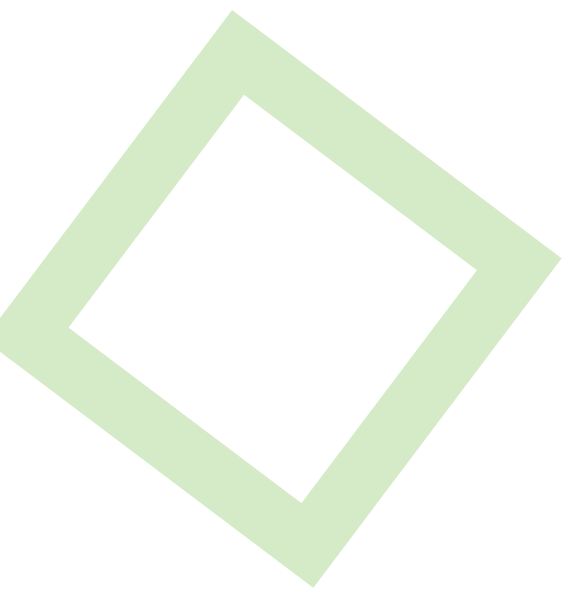
The COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruptions to many sectors in Ireland. The higher education sector is one which has been significantly impacted by the pandemic, with schools, colleges, and universities having to swiftly adapt and shift to online learning. Within this context, international students are among those that have been most affected by the consequences of the pandemic in terms of their student experience and wellbeing. The pandemic has brought about multiple challenges for international students, but it has also highlighted and heightened issues which already existed long before the pandemic hit. In April 2020, ICOS conducted an international student survey to better understand the challenges students were facing at the outset of the pandemic (ICOS 2020). It is evident that much has changed since then; however, many of the challenges and uncertainties that students faced in 2020 have continued to persist, while new challenges have also emerged. With this in mind, ICOS sought to conduct further research in 2021, involving a quantitative and qualitative study. It aimed at better understanding the challenges and difficulties students have faced during the pandemic in 2021 as well as their overall experience as international students in Ireland.


The research was conducted using an online survey, designed to gather quantitative and qualitative data, as well as focus groups. A total of 754 international students from 75 countries took part in the survey and 13 students participated in the focus groups. The study welcomed participation from all international students in Ireland (EAA and non-EEA), including English language students and students in all levels of higher education. The report has, therefore, been divided into two sections in order to facilitate reading. Section One looks at the experience of students in higher education institutions (HEI) and Section Two centres specifically on the experience of English language students (ELS). Both sections explore the following topics:

- Immigration
- Insurance
- Online Learning and Student Experience
- Communication and Support from the HEI or School
- Work and Costs
- Accommodation
- Wellbeing
- Racism
- Other Challenges

The following is a summary of the key findings from the report:

- A significant and concerning number of responses from international students related to experiences of racism in Ireland. 40% of students said they had either seen or been victims of racism, with only 5% reporting the incident. Students also repeatedly reported anti-social behaviour from groups of youths, concerns with safety, as well as discrimination in the workplace;
- Reports from students reinforced that the pandemic and lockdown restrictions have had a significant impact on them. Many students reported isolation, loneliness, depression, and anxiety. Nearly 80% of international students said their mental health had suffered as a consequence of the pandemic;
- Responses showed that accommodation continues to be a challenge for international students. 63% of English language students and 28% of international students studying in higher education share a room with at least one other person. Students reported encountering high rent costs, overcrowding, poor conditions, as well as difficulty in finding accommodation;
- Just 32% of participants agreed that their online learning was meeting their expectations. Students reported issues, such as, insufficient academic support, a lack of engagement, poor planning, as well as problems with internet connectivity and devices. Many ELS students reported that their English language skills had not developed;
- The cost of health insurance and its effectiveness were highlighted as a challenge by students, as most students' policies do not cover basic healthcare. The findings show that HEI students pay substantially more for health insurance than ELS students;
- International students' immigration permission and barriers to pathways to employment surfaced as significant challenges. Responses showed that international students encounter difficulty accessing work in their area of studies both during and after completion of their studies. For some, this leads to deskilling, underemployment and precarious work, to be able to cover their expenses in Ireland. 51% of students who provided details on their job were working in frontline services as cleaners, carers, and healthcare workers;




- 
- Findings indicated that international students incur a number of significant costs while studying in Ireland which pose a challenge for them. These include high costs in accommodation, health insurance, and tuition fees;
 - Responses showed that although international students are regarded as the same in terms of immigration status, they are not a homogeneous group. International students often have different concerns and needs depending on their level of studies.

Introduction

The education sector in Ireland, like many others, has been profoundly impacted by COVID-19. Within this context, international students are among those that have been most affected by the consequences of the pandemic, both in terms of their academic and student experience, as well as their overall wellbeing. This report builds upon ICOS' previous international student survey conducted in 2020 (ICOS 2020) which sought to better understand the challenges and difficulties facing international students at the outset of the pandemic. ICOS, therefore, has conducted further research to investigate not only the impact of the pandemic from an international student perspective, but also the overall experiences and challenges international students have face in Ireland. The project aimed to identify the issues facing international students, the actions that can be taken to address these issues, and the lessons that can be learned to improve the international student experience in Ireland.

The International Education Strategy for Ireland 2016-2020 estimated that between 2014 and 2015 international students contributed to a total of €1.58bn to the Irish economy (Department of Education and Skills 2016). Yet, the impact international students have in Ireland go far beyond their economic contribution. International students enrich the Irish higher education system and contribute significantly to Irish society, the economy, as well as to research. International students are also important contributors to the Irish labour market, both during and following completion of their studies; with many having worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic delivering vital frontline services. From an international student perspective, studying in Ireland provides an opportunity to experience a new culture, acquire new skills, and leads to personal and professional development. Studying in Ireland can also benefit students' countries of origin through capacity building as many return home and apply the skills they acquire during their time abroad.

It is clear that the benefits of international students are multiple and far reaching. However, continuing to attract international students and maintaining an international reputation as a world class study destination requires that measures and policies are in place to ensure that students have a positive experience during their time in Ireland. Though it is evident that much has changed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, many new uncertainties and challenges have emerged, while previously existing problems which predated the pandemic, such as, accommodation, racism, and immigration, continue to persist.



It is important to note that the rapid and changing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that some of the issues facing international students in Ireland at the outset of this research have since changed or been resolved. This includes, for example, the extension of visa permissions, the mode of delivery of classes, as well as the international travel and lockdown restrictions. In addition, the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines and testing have all changed significantly since the start of this project. Notwithstanding, this report aimed to reflect upon the main challenges that international students have faced throughout 2021, in a very uncertain time for all. The report sought to shed light on such challenges not only in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also in relation to the international student experience as a whole and ongoing challenges. It is hoped that this report will allow the voices of international students to be heard and facilitate further discussion on the issues that international students have encountered before and during COVID-19. Despite the many challenges, we share great optimism for the future of international education in Ireland and we hope that this report contributes to our understanding and reflection on how best to enhance the international student experience.

Methodology

The research focused on the experiences of international students (EEA and non-EEA students) studying in higher education and English language studies in Ireland. ICOS conducted an online survey that was available in 3 languages (English, Spanish, and Portuguese) and designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The survey was anonymous and ran from April to May 2021. Two focus groups with ELS students and international HEI students in Ireland were also conducted in August 2021 for a more in-depth understanding of students' lived experiences. The focus groups had a duration of approximately two hours and participation of students was on a voluntary basis. The HEI focus group was entirely carried out in English, while the ELS focus group was facilitated in Spanish. The focus groups were recorded for purposes of transcription, with consent from all students that were present. They were then transcribed in full. Any name included in quotes within this report are anonymised. In both the survey and focus groups, participants were asked questions across a range of themes, including, immigration, medical insurance, online learning and support, employment, wellbeing, accommodation, and racism. The data analysis methodology for this study consisted of a statistical analysis, as well as coding and thematic analysis of the qualitative data.

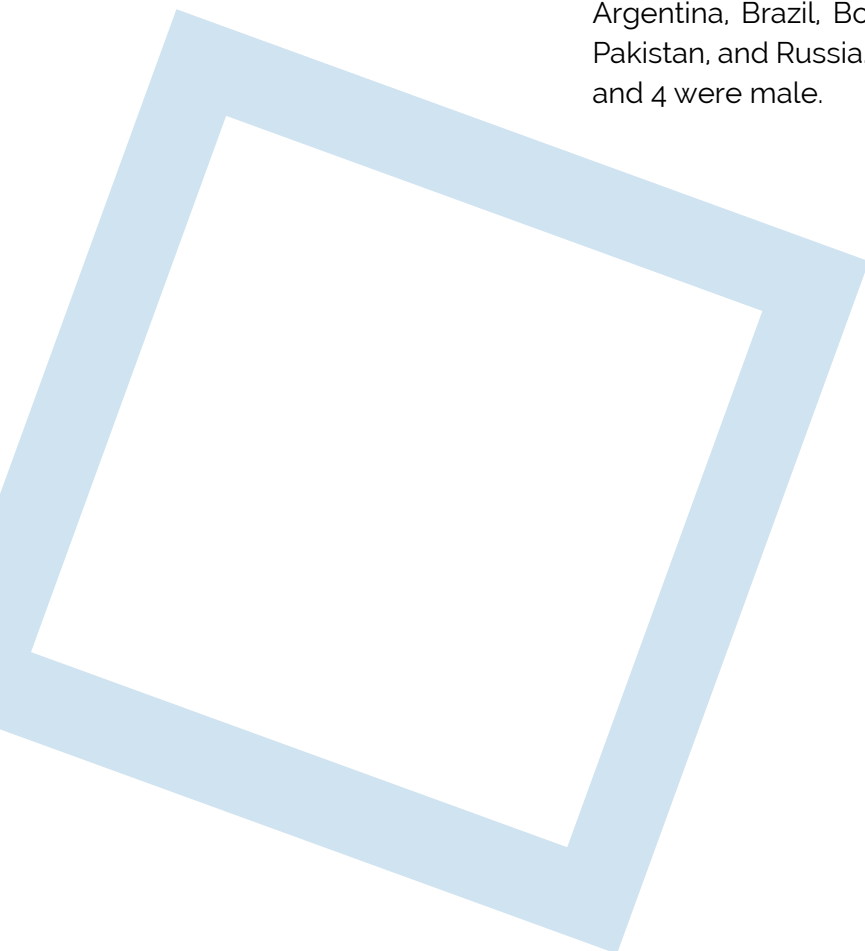


Participants

In total, 754 people responded to ICOS' COVID-19 International Student Survey 2021. The majority of respondents (59%) completed the survey in English. The number of participants who completed the survey in Spanish and Portuguese was very similar at 21% and 20% respectively. 58% of participants in the research were studying at an HEI, while 42% were studying at an English language school. In terms of the gender composition, 60% of survey respondents said they were female, 39% indicated that they were male. There were 8 respondents who identified themselves as non-binary, and 1 respondent preferred not to respond. 90% of international students that responded to the survey at the time said they were in Ireland.

- 23% of participants had been living in Ireland for less than 1 year
- 43% had been living in Ireland for a period of between 1-2 years
- 34% had been in Ireland for more than 2 years

Survey participants comprised of a diverse range of nationalities spanning 75 countries. The 10 countries with the highest participation in the survey represented 74% of total respondents. Overall, Brazilian students accounted for 41% of the total number of survey participants and represented the highest number of participants for both international students studying at English language schools and HEIs. The focus groups were attended by 13 participants from Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, El Salvador, India, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Russia. 9 participants in the focus groups were female and 4 were male.



Survey Participants

754
International Students



75
Countries



58%
HEI Students

42%
ELS Students

60%
Female



39%
Male



1%
Other

2

Focus Groups

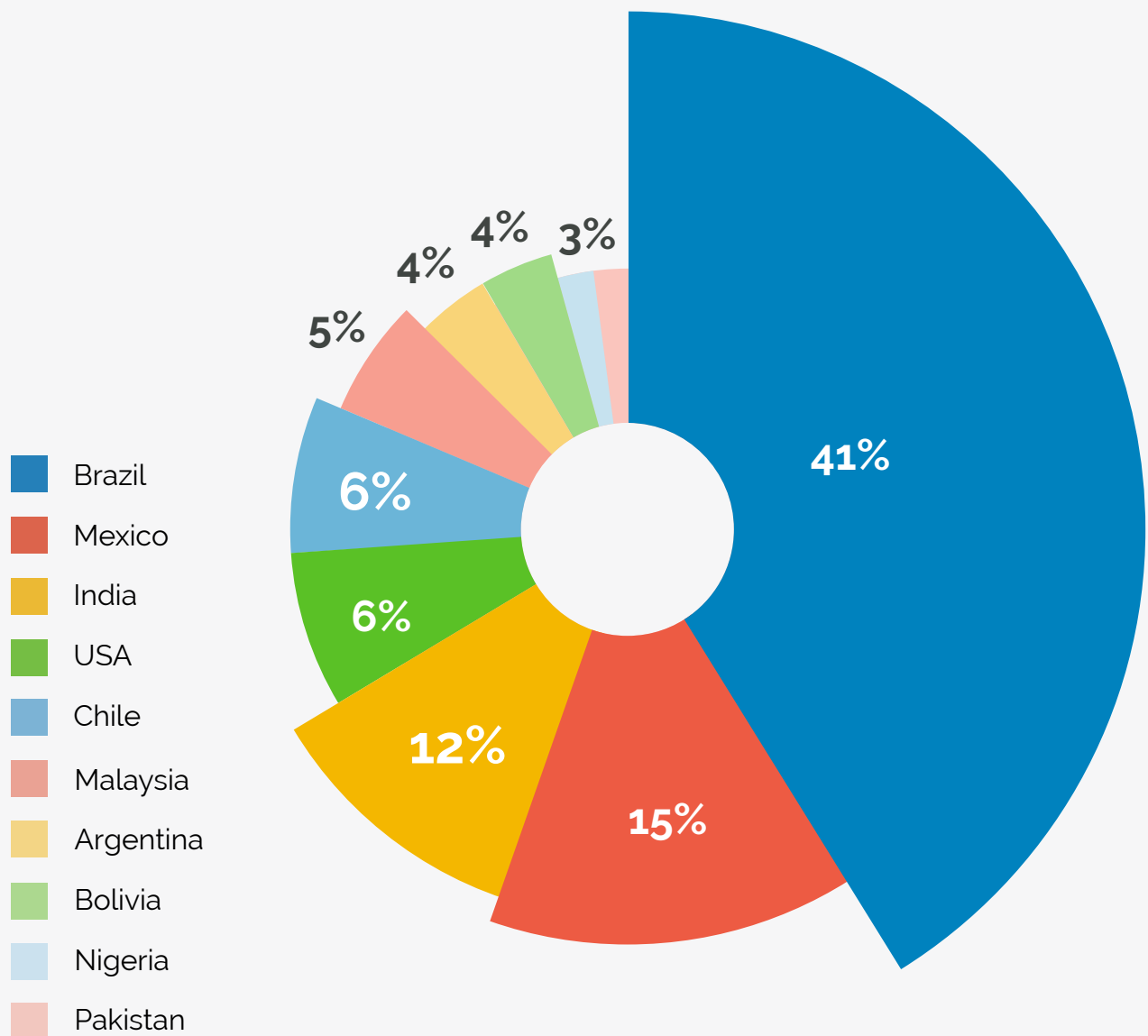


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International Students



Top Nationalities



STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

1. Immigration

There were two predominant responses among HEI students relating to immigration. The first was specifically regarding communication from immigration services, in which students indicated that they do not receive adequate information or updates. 51% of HEI participants said they were not satisfied with communication they received from immigration. Some students also reported experiencing problems with immigration officers when attending the immigration office. Second, due to public offices being shut as a consequence of lockdown restrictions, international students had difficulty in obtaining or renewing their Irish Residence Permit (IRP), as well as obtaining a PPSN. This had an impact on accessing employment, as such documents are necessary to work in Ireland.

Communication from Immigration Services	Obtaining or Renewing Documents
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Poor level of communication• Lack of adequate information or updates• Lack of or delay in response to email or phone queries• Problems with immigration officer at the immigration office	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• IRP Card• PPSN

"I am a first year PhD student and my university policy requires me to tutor classes. Due to office closures, I am unable to apply for an IRP card, and so unable to get paid for the tutoring I am currently providing. For the same reason I feel extremely stressed as I cannot leave the country in case of emergency as I will then have to apply for a new visa which is both costly and time consuming."

"Immigration is contradictory, and their process is very disrespectful for people. I have been living in Ireland since November 2020 and they haven't given me any solution regarding the IRP number."

"I would appreciate if the immigration can do more about GNIB/INIS permit issuance as it is a core pre-requisite to getting a job. You can't shut down a necessary service and expect international students to be in the limbo."

2. Insurance

One of the requirements for international students to obtain their immigration permission is to have private health insurance. The research showed that HEI students were paying an average of €309 for insurance, which was substantially more than that reported by ELS students (an average of €188). 54% of HEI students reported that they pay between €0 - €250 and 47% of participants said that the price of their insurance had increased. Responses from HEI students showed that there were two main concerns relating to health insurance. The first was regarding the excessive cost of health insurance in Ireland. The second was with respect to the effectiveness of the insurance, as most students' policies do not cover basic healthcare.

"The insurance price is outrageous. International students already have to pay higher college fees, accommodation fees, and for the IRP as well. We aren't even eligible for the Student Assistance Funding either. It seems they are finding any possible way to make international students pay more and more each time."

3. Online Learning & Student Experience

Online learning has formed the core of most students' academic learning experience in Ireland since the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020. Responses from students show that many have had their learning and overall experience in Ireland impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Though some international students were satisfied with the efforts of their college or university to deliver quality classes during the pandemic, many negative responses were also

highlighted. Among the responses from HEI students, 37% said that they were dissatisfied with their online learning, 35% of HEI students reported being satisfied, with the remaining students not providing a response.

3.1 Online Learning

HEI students reported issues such as insufficient academic support, a lack of engagement, lectures being pre-recorded, and poor planning, while those who missed out on practical modules felt particularly aggrieved. It was commonly cited among participants that they did not always have access to a reliable internet connection, or that technical issues often occurred during their lectures. This was further complicated by lecturers who chose not to record their classes, or did not provide notes, both of which negatively impacted on students. Moreover, responses showed that many students found online classes to be tiresome. Students also mentioned that their academic performance had suffered as a result of COVID-19. The feedback from HEI students, both positive and negative, included:

Positive	Negative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breakout rooms • Zoom recordings • Flexibility of online learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient academic support • Delivery solely through pre-recorded lectures • Poor planning • Impact on practical modules • Internet, technical issues, and devices • Lack of recording of classes and availability of notes • Fatigue

“The online classes are sometimes a disadvantage because not everyone has good internet connection and some lecturers do not record the classes out of petty reasons. Due to bad internet connections and no class session recording for some of the subjects, I am forced to not attend the class at all, therefore decreasing my quality of college experience in Ireland.”

CASE STUDY

Abiola

"I got to a stage where my laptop crashed. My laptop, it couldn't function, and I needed it to do an assignment, I had a deadline. So, I couldn't go to the local library because obviously they were closed due to the pandemic. And I couldn't travel to my university because I lived out of town. Because they were restricting the travel distance you should cover, you know? So, I couldn't go, and my school couldn't get me a laptop down to me, because those selling laptops were also closed due to the pandemic. So, I got frustrated. No family, no friends, I didn't know anyone to lend me a laptop to do my assignment and meet the deadline. I felt lonely, I felt not engaged, you know? I was so...I felt depressed, it was horrible. So, after 2 months that was when my faculty was able to get me a laptop."

Martina

"For me it was handy to have the online classes and I would like to have this flexibility when the things go back. Because, for example, when I have something just come up, like I have an appointment or other things while in college, it's easier when you can just log in to the classes and follow the classes online. You don't need to miss the class. Especially as an international student, that we have the attendance that we have to be strict about. So, if the college could keep the choice that you could watch the classes online, I think it would be a good thing."

3.2 Quality

Some HEI students provided feedback on their experience of online learning which largely related to the quality of online classes. A number of these students observed that their online classes were not delivered to the same level as their face to face classes, despite the efforts from their HEI or lecturers. This was particularly felt by students that had practical modules.

CASE STUDY

Jonathan

"About the quality of online classes, I found it very disappointing. It was my first time with an online course but still being a very prestigious course and college, I was expecting lecturers to be more prepared and more engaging. Most of the classes were a reading of slides and with no interaction with students. Assignments were way more difficult than the level of classes and basically no support to elaborate them. Some lectures had technical issues from their houses and were not able to do the lecture live, pre-recording them, which again is not engaging at all."

3.3 Tuition Fees

Many students also reported being dissatisfied with having to pay full international tuition fees to attend online lectures, particularly given that students could not avail of facilities, and owing to the lack of financial supports available to them.

3.4 Student Experience


The research also revealed the negative effect that COVID-19 has had on students' overall experience in Ireland. The cultural and social aspect of studying abroad is an important part of students' learning experience. However, the restrictive nature of the pandemic has meant that many students have found their time in Ireland to be very isolating. 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 they seek. Students reported not having had the full college experience, due to not being able to have more contact with professors or classmates, as well as not being able to have access to the campus or facilities.



"It has been incredibly difficult being in a brand new country and spending 99% of my time eating, sleeping, studying, and working in a dorm room. I appreciate and understand the gravity of the situation, but it's been hard not interacting with classmates and professors socially and seeing more of the country. It's been very disappointing and as a student enrolled in an applied (hands-on) program my learning experience has been drastically altered. I have not acquired the hands on skills that I thought I would and as someone who resigned from their job in December to be here for this program, that is a massive disappointment."

4. Communication & Support from HEIs

With regards to communication from their HEI, 52% of students responded positively, while 27% said they were dissatisfied. The students that did report being unhappy with the communication that they received from their HEI mentioned, for instance, not receiving confirmation on whether they would have to return to Ireland until the semester had almost begun. Some students also highlighted their disappointment with the level of support provided by their HEI during the pandemic, including mental health supports.



"The university has provided absolutely zero support to its international students. Links to videos on yoga and workouts are not helpful. The department is rude when you try to reach out. It's incredibly hard to be here with no support. I feel like they lied to me to get my money. Once I paid tuition, they stopped caring. They don't help where it counts. Very disappointed and will not be recommending the university to anyone."

"No support from the university. It's been a very unenjoyable experience, and it's not at all what they promised when recruiting me."

"International students at my institution have hardly received any communication from the international Office regarding COVID-19 and immigration appointment delays. We find this information on social media or by word-of-mouth. This is not very respectful or professional. In addition, we have not been liable for financial support from the university, even though we pay higher fees."

"I asked for help from college in September and they sent me a useless online course and never checked up on me again. I ended up going home halfway through term and a therapist said in January I had symptoms of major depressive disorder."

"The university has done nothing to help my mental health. The international department has blown me off several times. My own program director has as well."

CASE STUDY

Mateo

"I felt a strong lack of support from the university at the start of the pandemic. At the time, I was living alone because my housemates left for their countries whereas I couldn't because the border for my country was closed. I reached out to the university for support and only received one call in the 60 days I was isolated. During the call, I expressed my request for continuous support via phone calls but was never contacted again. There has been a lack of guidance from the school when considering the structure of the year and exams. Uncertainty during these times is understandable but compared to other universities, I felt like the university didn't have a solid plan. I would've appreciated them letting us know a full plan for the current year rather than having a vague plan that is subject to change."

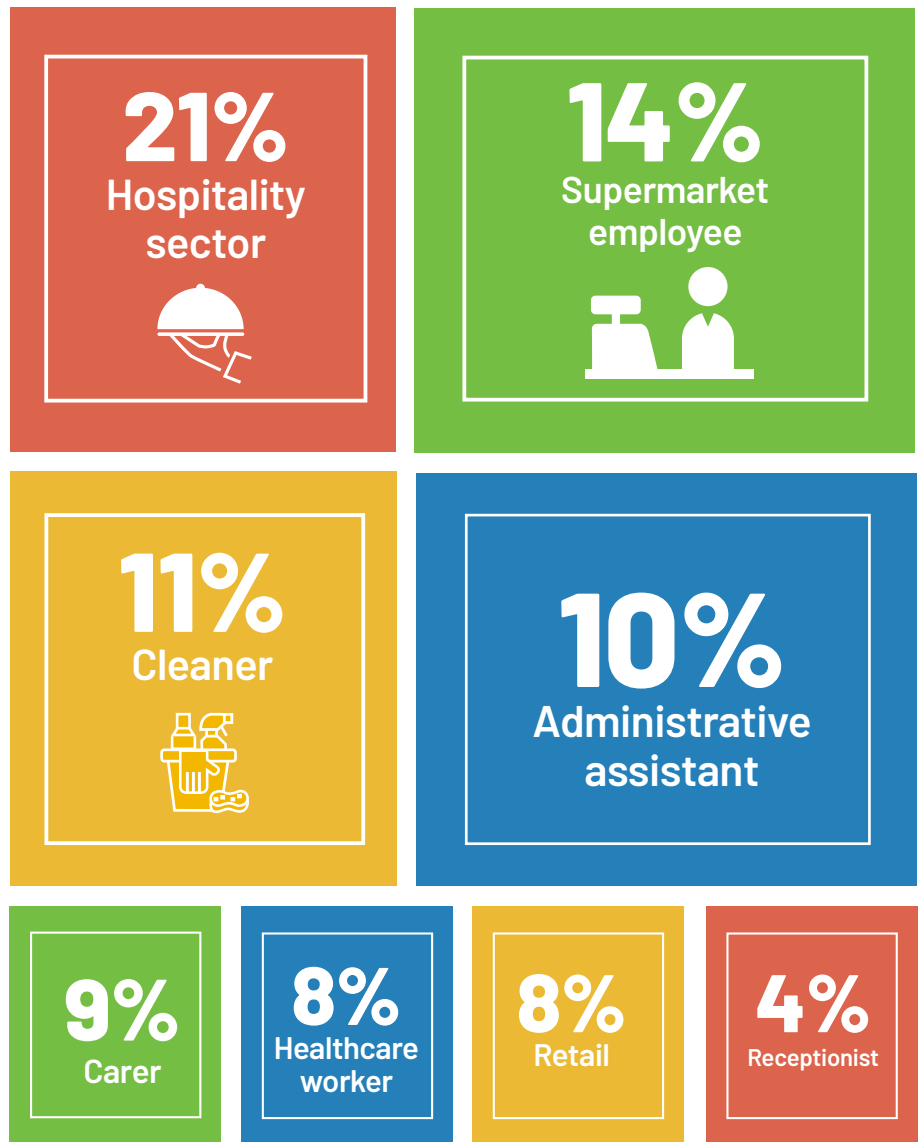
5. Work & Costs

One of the most overwhelming responses among HEI international students related to employment, and in particular with regards to the Third Level Graduate Programme (TLGP). Indeed, employment was one of the most recurring concerns across different survey questions. Non-EEA international students (those on a Stamp 2 permission), which make up the majority of students that participated in the study, are only permitted to work part-time (20 hours per week), with the exception of specific holiday periods. HEI students are also able to avail of the TLGP, once concluded with their studies. The scheme allows international students that have completed their degree in Ireland to seek work experience for up to 24 months and to apply for work or critical skills permits (Department of Justice 2021b). Some responses from HEI students highlighted their frustrations at the restrictive nature of their student immigration permission, which allows only for part-time work. Students also cited precarious work, deskilling, and an impact on employment opportunities due to the pandemic.

28% of HEI students reported they were working at the time of the survey. Responses from HEI students that were employed indicated that:



It is worth highlighting that many of the HEI students who participated in the research said they worked in frontline roles, such as cleaners, healthcare workers, and supermarket employees. The main categories of employment among HEI students were:



Other jobs carried out by HEI students included childminder, customer support, deli assistant, delivery driver, tutor, barista, translator, and warehouse operative.

5.1 Third Level Graduate Programme

There were a number of reports from students specifically in relation to the TLGP (Stamp 1G). Though in theory graduates have the opportunity to stay in Ireland for up to two years after their studies to gain work experience in their area and try to obtain a work permit, responses from students suggest that in practice this can be very difficult. Participants highlighted that finding employment and being hired under such permission is a challenge due to employers'

apparent lack of knowledge of the visa or a preference not to hire candidates under this permission. Some students expressed feeling unwelcome and being treated differently because of their immigration or non-European status.

"Most employers refuse to accept international students with stamp 1G making it difficult for some international students to get jobs."

"To be honest, I thought it was a mistake to come here as a student because you cannot find a job even after completing degrees from Ireland. The government never considers non-EU students as residents of the country instead they make things harder for us."

"Discrimination based on visa status. Although I am on the stamp 1G, I've applied for more than 1000 positions, but everything is down to my visa, not my qualifications. I am a lawyer, qualified in two countries, holder of a master's and a post-graduate, and all my experience is irrelevant."

"I am afraid of the future. Even though I will get 2 years visa to work full time and hopefully get a sponsor visa I feel that Irish labour market is not receptive to people with my type of visa."

"I finished college recently, received 1G visa. Companies are not fully aware of this visa. Distressed and anxious job hunting process. Future in Ireland is uncertain and unclear."

5.2 PhD Students

Non-EEA PhD students in Ireland are given the same Stamp 2 permission as students in other levels of studies, and, therefore, face the same challenges with employment despite their qualifications and skills. One of the few differences between international PhD students and international students at other levels of study is that PhD students are allowed to bring spouses or dependents to Ireland for the duration of their programme. However, spouses of PhD students are not permitted to work in Ireland and this restriction financially impacts students and their families. Many PhD participants also

stressed that the stipends they receive are not enough to cover their costs. Apart from living expenses, additional expenses that non-EEA PhD students must incur, include, private health insurance, travel costs, money transfers and exchange costs, and yearly immigration permission expenses, which are not accounted for in their stipends. Such challenges for international students at PhD level have had an impact on their studies and everyday lives in Ireland.

"Living here in Ireland as a PhD student with a partner that cannot be allowed to access employment or even engage in business. In short you have to pursue your dreams as you are killing the career aspirations of your partner."

"My spouse can't work and so I have to provide for family and study as well. Challenging."

5.3 Costs

International students at all levels of higher education expressed concern over the cost of living in Ireland. Non-EEA students highlighted that what they earn from part-time employment is not enough to cover their many costs such as accommodation, health insurance, immigration permission costs, high tuition fees for international students, as well as other everyday costs. Some participants reported struggling to survive under these circumstances, and that such issues were having an impact on their studies, as well as their mental health.

"The expenses, often unexpected, like healthcare raises. Residence card fees. Housing, if you can find it, is expensive and poor quality. Tuition is expensive. Honestly, with the healthcare increase I have talked with family members about quitting my degree due to the financial and emotional strain. I'm sad."

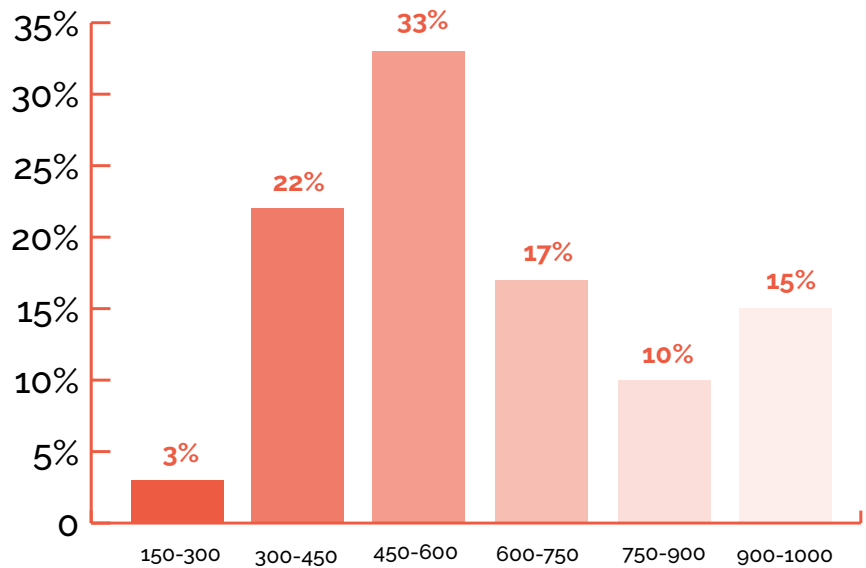
"I work 23h per week, I also do a cleaner job to complement my earning. I live anxious because of that. I buy limited food because otherwise it changes my budget and effects my savings for college."

6. Accommodation

There were concerns among international students regarding accommodation in Ireland. Students in HEIs reported:

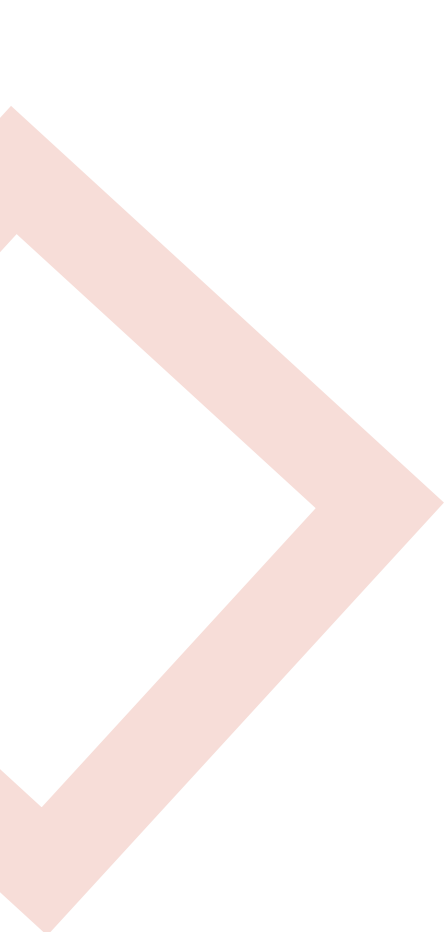
- Overcrowding
- Lack of availability
- High rent costs
- Poor conditions

Monthly rent paid by HEI students



Overall, the average cost of rent for HEI students was found to be €573 compared with ELS students who paid on average €492.

The research also found that statistically international students in HEIs tend to pay higher rates of rent than those studying in English language schools.



70% of HEI participants reported having their own room

23% of HEI participants said they shared a room with 1 person

4% of HEI students reported sharing a room with 2 people

3% reported sharing a room with 3 people or more

"I moved out of a 5 bedroom house that I was sharing with 15 people around 9 months ago, specially to keep up with my mental health and improve the quality of my studies. I pay an additional €100 monthly compared to the amount I was paying, but now I have my own room."

7. Wellbeing

Living and studying abroad as an international student is in normal circumstances already challenging. Students must adapt to a new environment, culture, and sometimes a new language or a language in which they do not have advanced knowledge. In addition, they must cope with the challenge of being far away from their family and friends. Such challenges have been heightened by the pandemic. International students have had to deal with not only being away from their support network in a time of worry and anxiety, but also of not having had the social and cultural experience they expected from their studies in Ireland due to the pandemic. Additionally, students have also been living with uncertainty surrounding their immigration status, permission, renewal, and travel restrictions. These factors seem to have contributed towards HEI international students experiencing higher levels of difficulty with loneliness, depression, and anxiety. Some students even had to make the difficult decision to return home. An overwhelming and worrying response from HEI international students related specifically to mental health.

79% of HEI international students said their mental health suffered as a consequence of the pandemic.

"Lonely."

"Mental health."

"Anxiety and depression."

"Gets lonely sometimes."

"My emotional/mental health has been impacted intensely. I've got online therapy hoping I'm going to be better."

"Being confined indoors for much of the time has increased my depression."

"The biggest challenge is loneliness. It is quite difficult to be away from family."

"I am currently doing therapy because this situation has me depressed and anxious."

"Loneliness and adapting to a new country without being able to socialise or properly communicate with people."

CASE STUDY

Lauren

"I spent 6 months alone in an apartment because both my roommates moved out. I didn't see any people and had a mental health crisis. I ended up returning home at the beginning of Easter break and I will be finishing my classes from here."

Daniel

"I always thought of myself as resilient and mentally strong, but the pandemic showed me how vulnerable I truly am. I've never addressed and therefore never recovered from the two months I spent alone. My exam anxiety has been at an all-time high and is impacting my academic performance. I intend on going to counselling during the summer to address these as I am going into my final year next year."

Alexander

"I got a depression episode because of isolation, and I had to contact my doctor to change the medication and I also had to extend the timeline for the due date for my first trimester due to the depression episode that happened to me because of isolation. Because nothing, there was no other trigger. And it was really quite...it was quite dark. They were quite dark days, especially in October, November timeframe. Because, I mean, it was not possible to contact anyone to go for support. So, yea, I definitely faced this and I suffered because of this. And it was one of the main reasons why I had to go back home because it was too hard mentally for me to stay isolated."

Despite these challenges, 43% of HEI students said they felt optimistic about their future in Ireland. 54% of HEI participants also indicated that living and studying in Ireland had been a positive experience for them; however, 24% reported having a negative experience, and 22% gave a neutral response.

8. Racism

There were alarming reports from HEI students regarding racism, anti-social behaviour, and safety in Ireland. A concerning 40% of HEI students said they had either seen or been victims of racism. Only 4% of HEI students said they reported the incident. There was no notable difference between male and female participants in terms of their experience of racism. The most common reason for which international students (ELS and HEI), chose not to report the racist incident that they had witnessed or suffered was because they believed that no action would be taken in relation to their complaint, or that their claims would not be taken seriously. Indeed, this view was shared by 1 in 3 of those who provided feedback on why did not report a racist incident they had seen or experienced.

HEI students said they chose not to report racist incidents because they:

- Believed that no action would be taken
- Believed their claims would not be taken seriously
- Feared discrimination from authorities
- Believed they would receive no support in relation to their allegations
- Had no proof
- Were unsure where or how to report
- Did not consider it serious enough to report
- Feared losing their jobs (in cases of racism in the workplace)

40% of HEI students said they had seen or been victims of racism.

"Life has been relatively positive until Covid. Before, there was probably a racist comment here and there, now, it has been happening more commonly."

Participants who had experienced or witnessed racism at the hands of groups of youths expressed their frustration at the apparent lack of consequences facing young perpetrators. In several of the responses, the international students highlighted specifically anti-social behaviour and racist incidents carried out by teenage groups.

"The minors in this country are never punished. They can do what they like and all we can do is nothing. The police do not take our report seriously, so what's the point in wasting your time?"

"Once the teenagers robbed my bike and I couldn't do anything as there were many of them. They kept saying "go back to your country."

"Some teenagers robbed my phone and insulted me for speaking Spanish."

"There were some youths throwing eggs directly in my face. I know the Garda do not touch them and it is better just to leave."

There were also responses relating to racism that took place at work and even of racist incidents when seeking accommodation.

9. Other Challenges

Further challenges mentioned by students included cultural barriers, concerns regarding COVID-19 and uncertainty generated by the pandemic.

Cultural Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapting to Ireland and the Irish culture
COVID-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID-19 information • Working on the frontline • Access to vaccines and PCR tests
Uncertainty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • COVID-19 restrictions and lockdown • International travel • Immigration permission and renewal • Uncertain future (for example with study and work)

"Unable to integrate into the classroom, local students were reluctant to team up at the beginning of the semester."

"Given the grim situation of COVID-19 in Ireland, I'm not sure that I feel optimistic about living here. The costs are most likely all going to increase and as an international student that presents a heavy burden."

"Feeling part of and integrated in the society."

"To be accepted by others in the country."

"It was a cultural shock and bit home sickness."

ENGLISH LANGUAGE STUDENTS

1. Immigration

Similar to HEI students, the responses from ELS students on immigration also related to communication and obtaining or renewing documents. Students reported poor levels of communication from the immigration services in Ireland, and that they do not receive adequate information or updates on immigration decisions that affect them, or that the information that they do have access to is confusing. Students also expressed their frustration over the lack of response to email and phone queries from the immigration services, as well as with communication issues in person at the immigration office. In addition, the pandemic effected their ability to register or renew their immigration permission, due to many public offices being shut as a consequence of lockdown restrictions. Some participants also reported difficulties obtaining a PPSN. This had an impact on students, for example, with regards to employment, as their immigration permission and PPSN are necessary documents for work in Ireland.

Communication from Immigration Services	Obtaining or Renewing Documents
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Poor level of communication• Lack of adequate information or updates• Lack of or delay in response to email or phone queries• Problems with immigration officer at the immigration office	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• IRP Card• PPSN

"The information published on the immigration website isn't updated and the processes are very slow."

"Secure/correct information coming from immigration is a rarity. Our renewal depends on the immigration officer, some provide good information, others don't."

"The rules on the immigration website are not always what the Gardai at immigration ask for. It really depends on who you get what rules they will enforce or not. The process on the website should be the same as what the officers ask us. If it is not clear and transparent, how can we comply?"

"It is very difficult to contact the immigration office. There is no timely response or follow-up to questions or requests."

2. Insurance

The main issue raised by English language students about their health insurance was in relation to its effectiveness, as most students' policies do not cover basic healthcare. Unlike international students studying in higher education, the cost of health insurance was not raised as a concern by English language students. ELS students reported paying an average of €188 for their insurance, which was remarkably less than that which was reported by international students in higher education. 84% of ELS students reported that they pay between €0 - €250, and 26% of participants said that the price of their insurance had increased.

CASE STUDY

Jimena

"This summer I decided to take a job at a pizza place and suffered a second-degree burn. And well, that's when you start thinking, what does this insurance cover? And it turns out that it is practically very basic. It doesn't cover, for example, a burn, it doesn't cover...it is practically when you are dying that you are going to be covered by the insurance. It is important that one has a better health coverage. We are absolutely unprotected with regards to this."

CASE STUDY

Paola

"When we arrived in Ireland the school required an insurance, which comes included with the price. Well, this insurance doesn't cover anything, in reality. And the truth is that health is private and it's expensive. In my experience as a care assistant, I suffered several accidents by bicycle. I fell many times on the bicycle on rainy days, on days in which there was some ice on the streets. I was also rolled over on on several occasions by the wheelchair of one of the grannies with whom I worked for. I also worked with people who have limited mobility, and therefore, the risk of them falling is very high and the risk that you fall with them is very high. In my case my agency, or my employer, doesn't give me any insurance, therefore, when I was at risk of COVID because one of the grannies tested positive, I spent several days without working. I had to take it as a holiday, I think that's super unfair."

Catalina

"I had COVID because someone from the company where I work tested positive. As a result of that they closed the entire company and I felt unprotected and without anything. Without access to...they just sent me a message over the phone saying I had tested positive, that I should wait [during] my quarantine. But I didn't have anything in Ireland. It was people who have helped me, roomies, my roomie who has helped me, who tested negative, and that's how I was able to eat and feed myself during my quarantine. As for the school no one would give me any information about what my insurance covered. The only thing they told me was that the insurance wasn't even comprehensive enough to cover my expenses with medication or something like that, which practically in terms of the health system, students are unprotected in Ireland."

3. Online Learning & Student Experience

Online classes have been a major part of ELS students' academic experience in Ireland throughout the pandemic. At the time of this

research, many ELS students had never set foot in a classroom. Among responses highlighted by ELS students include challenges with online classes, quality of classes and fulfilment of ILEP requirements, school fees, not achieving the level of English desired and not having the possibility of immersion in the Irish culture.

3.1 Online Learning

ELS students reported significant challenges in learning English through their online classes with many reflecting disappointingly on the lack of progress they had made. Students recognised the efforts made by their English language school to deliver quality classes during the pandemic, yet more were found to be unhappy with their experience of online learning. Some participants gave positive feedback on their online classes but still viewed these classes as no atonement for face to face classes. Among the English language students that responded to the survey, 48% said they were dissatisfied with their experience of online learning. The main feedback from students in relation to online classes included:

Positive	Negative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of different online platforms and tools • More interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The variation in teaching and quality among schools • Poor activities and engagement • Internet access and devices • Many students per class • Attendance issues • Fatigue

"Online classes are insufficient because there are so many people speaking together or waiting to speak, apart from the connection issues. Attendance is even worse because we are not always marked correctly, and we cannot even reverse any errors with the school."

"Taking online classes is tiring and boring at this point, especially for us because interaction is essential when learning a language and we're losing it. We need challenging dynamics and other strategies to learn based on an interactive and digital environment."

"My school has done its best to improve its customer services with its limits. Nevertheless, the classes have not been close to the experience and learning that we would have in face to face classes."

Responses showed that many were unhappy with the quality of teaching offered by their school and that the standard of online teaching varied greatly depending on the teacher and the school. It was also common for there to be constant changing of teachers, which disrupted students' learning.

"Unsuitable material. Classes online that are low quality. It is difficult to motivate yourself due to the poor quality of classes."

"They keep changing teachers, so It's hard to keep the motivation because we never learn a topic until the end."


3.2 Compliance with ILEP Regulations

91% of ELS students reported that their school was fulfilling its obligations under the Interim List of Eligible Programmes (ILEP) in delivering 15 hours of taught classes per week, with no more than 15 students per class (Department of Justice 2021). However, there were still numerous reports from students that their schools were failing to comply with basic requirements of the ILEP, such as, failing to fulfil class hours or students being placed in the incorrect level.

"At the moment I am very upset with my school because I paid almost €2000 and they don't comply with the 15 hours per week."

3.3 Impact on Development of the English Language

Because of the lack of interaction during the pandemic and due to classes having been carried out entirely in an online format, ELS students felt that their learning outcomes and development of their English language skills had not reached the desired level. Given that learning a new language often requires a dynamic approach to teaching that is built on non-verbal communication and interaction, which is not easily achieved through online learning, it was unsurprising that many ELS students were dissatisfied with their online English classes.



"Frustration, because although I have been living here for a year, I consider that my level of English has not improved and all of my savings has been invested in my education, which at the end of the day has not yielded results."

3.4 Course Fees

One of the recurring issues arising from the students' responses related to course fees. Many participants reported being dissatisfied with having to pay full fees for their courses which were being delivered online. A significant number of participants expressed that their course fees should have been reduced to reflect the shift to online learning, especially as they felt the quality of online classes was inferior to face to face classes.

3.5 Student Experience

English language students also highlighted not having had the opportunity of a cultural experience in Ireland due to classes being fully online and lockdown restrictions. For international students, immersing themselves in the local culture is one of the most important aspects of the student experience in Ireland. It is particularly important for English language students as it forms an essential part of developing their language skills, through day-to-day practice outside of the classroom. Unfortunately, COVID-19 restrictions and online classes have meant that many students have not been able to benefit from this aspect of studying abroad, which has affected their learning and overall experience as international students in Ireland.

"I feel that I have missed out on the experience of living and studying abroad, practising the language, meeting new people and getting to know new cultures. On top of that, I am not having the opportunity to get to know Ireland because of the restrictions."

4. Communication & Support from School

Many ELS students were found to be dissatisfied with the support they received from their English language school during the pandemic. The survey showed that just 47% of ELS students responded positively about the level of support offered by their English language school during the pandemic, with the remaining students responding that they were either dissatisfied or neutral. It was widely reported by students that their school did not provide

sufficient information and support to the level that students expected. Several English language students said that their school had been dismissive about difficulties that they faced, and that there was a lack of empathy shown to students, especially in challenging times due to the pandemic. Additionally, there were some reports from ELS students that they were being treated unfairly by their school, including in matters relating to their attendance. This is particularly stressful for non-EEA English language students, as they are expected to attend 85% of their classes and failure to do so may result in their permission being cancelled by immigration.

"The only thing that we would like is a bit more understanding from the teachers when things happen that are outside our control e.g. problems with internet, devices etc. It is not always possible to connect or maintain a stable connection during classes. This is a time to be empathetic and understand that the circumstances are not always ideal for taking classes."

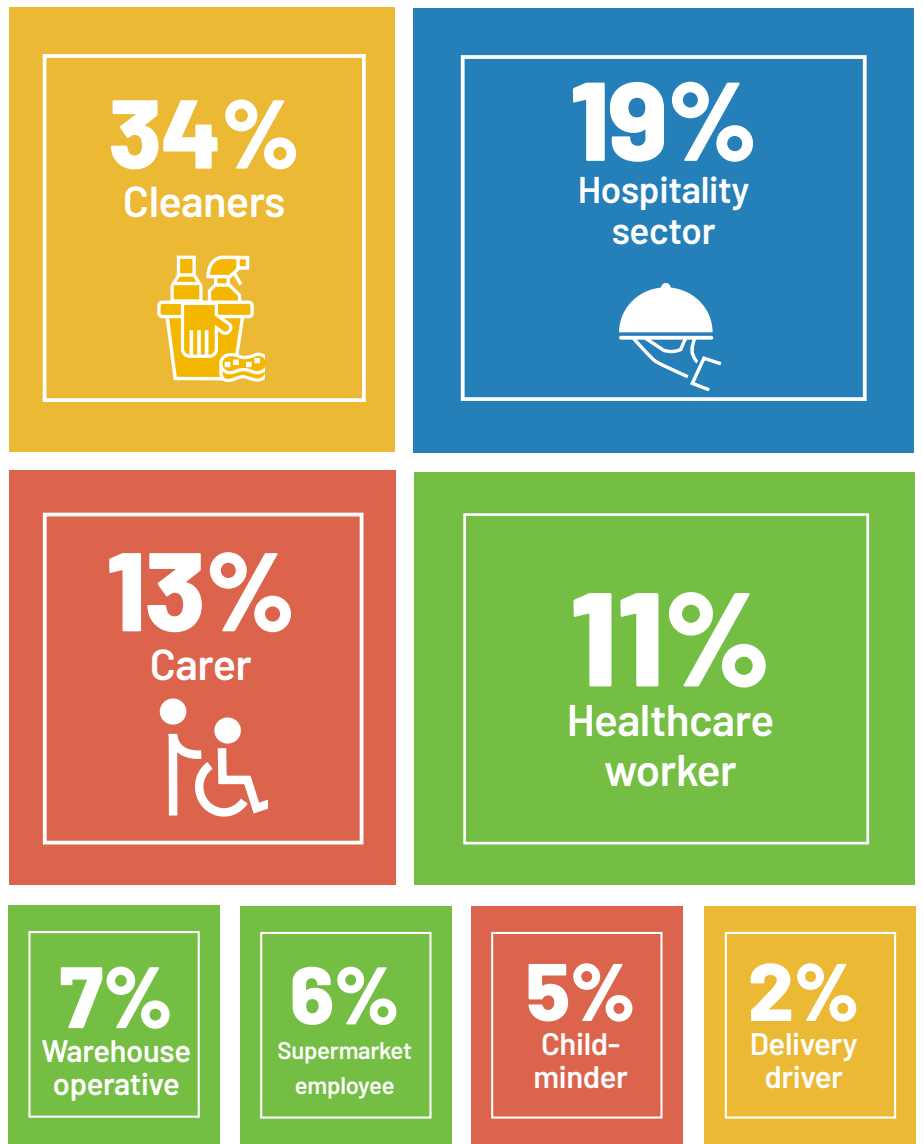
"The schools should provide support to their students and not only think about attracting them to obtain money. I think they should be more concerned about how students are doing now, and how we are learning."

5. Work & Costs

57% of ELS students reported that they were working at the time of the survey. Reports from ELS students that were employed indicated that:



Similar to HEI students, many of the ELS students reported they were working in frontline roles. The main categories of employment for ELS students included:



Several students reported precarious working conditions, describing their jobs as demanding and low paid. ELS students working as frontline workers said they felt undervalued for the work they do.

“As a student working for 20 hours a week, the minimum wage barely allowed me to renew, pay the rent and eat for the past two months. I’m currently on the verge of quitting this job to be able to rest a bit as I’m developing the carpal tunnel syndrome.”

Students also expressed concerns about the difficulties finding employment due to their Stamp 2 permission.

“When they see that you are not European, they won’t hire you. You can have all of the skills and have even passed the tests, but without the European passport, it’s a “no”.

5.1 Costs

The cost of living and expenses were highlighted by several students who reported that what they earn from part-time employment is not enough to cover costs such as accommodation, health insurance, immigration permission costs, high school fees, as well as other everyday costs. Some students reported having difficulty surviving under these circumstances, and that such issues were having an impact on their studies as well as their mental health.

"The 20 hours of work is not enough to be able to save money and pursue another degree. If you want to save some money, you have to share a cramped accommodation with four people. It's complicated to save money to be able to study further. You end up having to choose to work longer hours and negatively affect your studies."

CASE STUDY

Marcos

"My biggest challenge is the fact that we are allowed to work just 20 hours per week. The rent in Dublin is very expensive and if we want to renew the visa for the English School it is very hard to save the money. The situation gets worse when we want to study in higher education, the prices are high. In my case I'm struggling to save money for a master's degree, which is a lot since I'm not an European citizen and I pay more than a citizen. This situation is affecting directly my mental health, I'm having anxiety crises all the time."

Daniela

"Sharing a house with 10 people paying €450 in rent per month plus electricity, only being able to work 20 hours. In addition to all the expenses I have to save money to pay for school, which is expensive, plus the immigration permission. I work with cleaning in underemployment, and I am even humiliated because I am not fluent enough to speak and communicate in English. I am not respected simply because people think since I am not European, I don't deserve respect."

6. Accommodation

Concerns from students regarding accommodation included:

- Overcrowding
- Lack of availability
- High rent costs
- Poor conditions

For many students their accommodation had a significant impact on their online learning throughout the pandemic. Given that students shared accommodation with other students, participating in online classes was a challenge due to noise and conflicting class or work schedules among roommates.

37%

of ELS participants reported having their own room

45%

of ELS participants said they shared a room with 1 person

10%

of ELS students reported sharing a room with 2 people

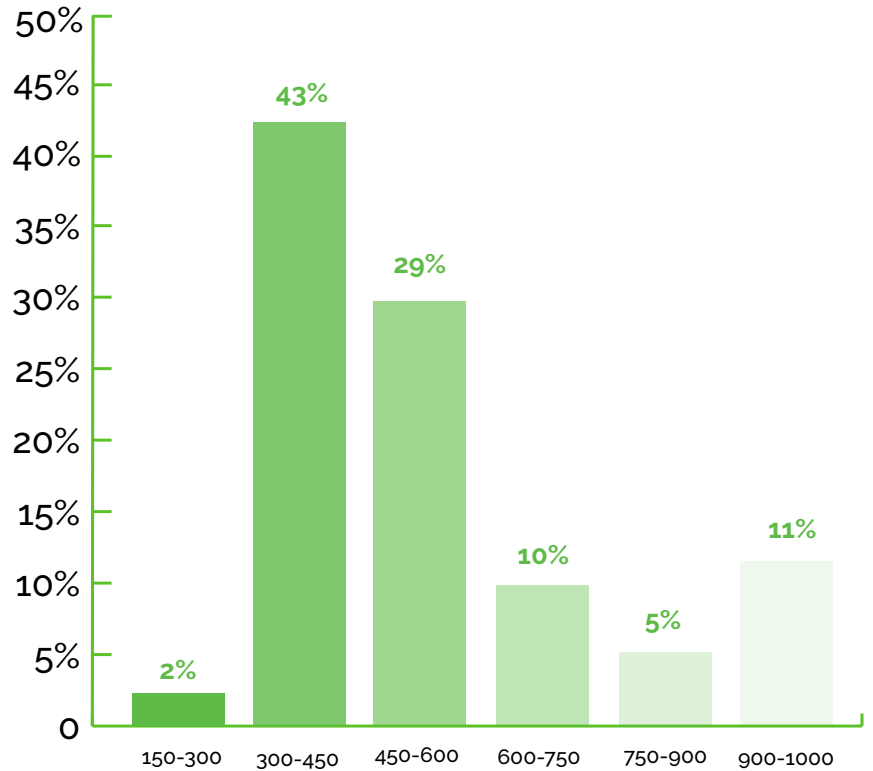
5%

reported sharing a room with 3 people or more

3% reported sharing a room with 4 people or more

45% of ELS participants reported paying up to €450 for rent, with the average cost of rent for ELS students found to be €492.

Monthly rent paid by ELS students



Several students provided feedback on issues they had with their landlords.

CASE STUDY

Maria

"I had problems with my landlord and in the end to move out I had to lose my deposit. Because they set their rules, and no one can change their minds and we can't complain anywhere. Worst of all, no one knows who the owner is to be able to make a complaint. So, I went through that moment last year and it was very...I mean, you feel ripped off with this bad feeling and a bad experience that one takes with them."

Pablo

"We were scammed many times by the landlord. We think we are dealing with the owner but, in reality, there is no one to guide you with regards to the rent. The prices are very high, very high rents, and the contract is not made directly with the owner."

Natalia

"The landlord was a person who subleased the house, he was not the owner himself. After many months we learned that it was like that. So, obviously this person fooled us and with extra money for the sake of us renting. And violating our privacy because he could enter whenever he wanted to in the apartment."

7. Wellbeing

Encouragingly, 45% of ELS participants said they felt optimistic about their future in Ireland; however, 33% of students reported not being optimistic about their future in Ireland and 25% said that they were unsure. In terms of their experience of living and studying in Ireland, 44% of ELS students reported having a positive experience, 29% said their experience had been negative, and 27% gave a neutral response. There was an overwhelming and alarming response from students regarding COVID-19 restrictions and the effects on students' mental health. Responses were particularly worrying in terms of loneliness and anxiety.

78% of ELS students said their mental health suffered as a consequence of the pandemic.

"I am seeing a psychologist on zoom"

"I have anxiety crises"

"Solitude"

"I have highly struggled with my mental health"

"I had burnout at the end of last year"

"Mental crisis because of the pandemic"

"It has been very complicated dealing with this. Now I am doing therapy because I have developed an eating disorder as a consequence of anxiety"

"I've started online therapy with a Brazilian professional because it's hard and/or expensive to do so in Ireland. I live in constant stress regarding my money situation."

8. Racism

The number of international students who reported in the survey that they had witnessed or experienced racism since arriving in Ireland is a cause for deep concern. Indeed, 39% of ELS students said they had either seen or been victims of racism. Of those that said they had witnessed or experienced racism, a mere 5% reported the incident. One of the most frequent reasons why ELS students chose not to report racism was due to there being a language barrier.

ELS students chose not to report racist incidents because they:

- Believed that no action would be taken
- Believed their claims would not be taken seriously
- Feared discrimination from authorities
- Believed they would receive no support in relation to their allegations
- Had no proof
- Were unsure about where or how to report the incident
- Felt a language or communication barrier
- Did not consider it serious enough to report
- Feared losing their jobs (in cases of racism in the workplace)



39%

of English language students
said they had seen or been
victims of racism.

Not only is the number of international students that mentioned having suffered or witnessed racism in Ireland concerning, but reports from students of a lack of trust in authorities in relation to reporting racist incidents is also worrying.

"The police in this country discriminate against us and do not pay attention to our problems."

"I do not feel that the gardai are receptive and I don't feel comfortable to discuss the case with them."

"We know Irish people come first and we will waste time trying to report something when we have seen other people reporting and authorities doing nothing"

"Since I arrived in Ireland, I have felt safe (in comparison to the country I was born in) but the last few months I have noticed an increase in incidents, and I don't feel protected by the local police"

Students provided accounts of being victims or witnessing insults and comments, for instance, on the streets, in public transport, on campus, and from neighbours.

"I was insulted on the street for being a foreigner"

"I've heard comments on the streets about my hair (which is curly) and my appearance, but I chose not to give them too much attention."

"In the bus, an Irishman shouting at a Brazilian girl claiming she was not from the country and should leave. In my case, an employer shouted at me."

"I experienced a racist incident, I was working in a university and some of the students started talking badly about Brazilians, that we were ruining their country. I felt very offended, but I kept working."

"The racist act was committed by a previous neighbour from Ireland. I regret not reporting the incident."

Many students reported that they had experienced or witnessed racism at the hands of groups of youths and expressed their frustration at the apparent lack of consequences facing young perpetrators of racism. Some students also highlighted that they feel the authorities do not protect them in such cases.

"As for the teenagers, I have had several incidents. A few days ago while I spoke to my family on the phone, they threw a water bottle at me."

"They were young teenagers who said racist words while I was working with delivery. I did not believe that any action would be taken against the offenders, as they are minors and heavily protected by the law."

"There is no justice for us with respect to racist attacks here from teenagers, there's no law to protect us and that's why they do what they want and attack us."

There were also reports from students of racism in the workplace.

"Many times, we are looked down upon at work or we do more than we should in our position. We work more than the natives and they don't appreciate our efforts. And many do not say anything, or express themselves freely, so that they won't lose their jobs."

CASE STUDY

Lorena

"I have already been in Ireland for 16 months. Sometimes I wonder if it's worth so much sacrifice to learn a language. We are unappreciated, unworthy, and underestimated. We are not given a voice. When we are given a voice, we are not understood. Our problems are minimised. Coming from the people from a country that knows what it is like to have to leave home and go to another country in search of opportunities and personal growth. I don't understand why the Brazilians are unappreciated, since we work hard, we gain very little, we suffer discrimination, abuse, and harassment. We share beds and rooms, we pay a lot of money, we pay for practically everything, and yet we are not respected. I think this is very sad because I never imagined this reality before coming to Ireland. Everyone sells this image of a welcoming society. With the existence of COVID or not, that wouldn't change. My experience was not positive. COVID only reduced everyone's level of tolerance. Today things are clearer because there isn't a lot of tolerance."

9. Other Challenges


Further concerns mentioned by ELS students included language and cultural barriers, COVID-19 related concerns, and uncertainty generated by the pandemic

Language & Cultural Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Difficulty with the language• Adapting to Ireland and the Irish culture
COVID-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• COVID-19 information and access to vaccines• Working on the frontline
Uncertainty	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• COVID-19 restrictions and lockdown• International travel• Immigration permission and renewal• Uncertain future (for example with study and work)




Conclusion & Recommendations

The findings from this report have provided insights into the international student experience in Ireland and highlighted the different challenges students have faced in 2021. Responses, for example, reveal the worrying impact that the pandemic, including lockdown restrictions and online learning, has had on students' mental health and wellbeing. Many students reported experiencing isolation and loneliness, with some saying they developed depression and anxiety. This had a considerable impact on students' studies and overall experience in Ireland, which in some cases led students to discontinue their studies and return home. There were also reports from students who said they did not have access to supports and mental health services.



The findings showed that for international students, accommodation remains an ongoing challenge. Students highlighted overcrowding, subletting, high rent costs, availability, and suitability of housing as the most prominent difficulties they encountered. Given international students mostly live in shared accommodation, this presented significant challenges when attending online classes or maintaining social distancing. There was a substantial response from students with regards to the immigration service in Ireland. International students indicated that they did not have access to adequate information or updates from immigration and that the information that was available to them was often confusing. Some students also mentioned having problems with the immigration officer when attending their appointment. Responses also emphasised that health insurance, which is a requirement for students' immigration permission, is excessive in price and does not provide basic health support. Furthermore, the findings highlight that some students are paying substantially more than others. In addition, due to the closure of most public offices during the pandemic, many students were unable to register for essential documents and remained, for example, without their immigration permission (IRP) or could not obtain a PPSN. This consequently resulted in some students facing problems obtaining employment.

The student immigration permission and pathways to employment surfaced as significant issues for participants in this research. For many international students studying in higher education, having the possibility to undertake work experience in their area of studies, both during and following completion of their course, was a key motive for choosing Ireland as a study destination. Indeed, the Third Level Graduate Programme is one of the main reasons HEI students choose Ireland to pursue their degree. Notwithstanding, the findings indicate that international students are often confronted with notable obstacles to accessing employment. Students reported



being turned down work opportunities during their studies because of their student immigration permission (Stamp 2) and, similarly, being denied or overlooked for employment opportunities after their studies because of their visa permission under the TLGP. Several HEI students from the focus groups voiced their concerns about the uncertainty of finding employment which they said had contributed to a deterioration in their mental health. Many HEI participants in the research highlighted that employers in Ireland are unaware of the TLGP which points to a lack of promotion of the visa and raises questions over its effectiveness. While ELS students often face linguistic barriers that can limit their employment options, the study found that most international students working at the time, including graduates on the TLGP, said they were employed in low-paid, and at times precarious work. Over half of those who reported having a job were working in frontline services.

A key finding made evident from the research is that although all international students are treated the same in terms of their immigration status (Stamp 2), the reality is that international students are not a homogenous group and often have different concerns and needs depending on their level of studies. This was possible to observe from the variation in responses between ELS and HEI students, but was particularly reinforced by the responses from PhD students, who tend to be at a different stage of their careers and personal lives in comparison to students at other levels of study. International PhD students in Ireland are highly skilled professionals, but are not treated as workers, in terms of immigration status. They, therefore, encounter similar barriers to employment as other international students. For many 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. Moreover, the barriers PhD students encounter during and after completion of their degree leads students to seek employment in other countries. This is especially 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. The research also indicated that international students are faced with numerous high costs during their time in Ireland, which has an impact on their learning, wellbeing, and overall student experience. Students are faced with high rent costs, overcrowded and substandard accommodation, high medical insurance costs, which does not cover basic health services, high international tuition fees, as well as other everyday costs. Some students even reported struggling to survive under these circumstances.

Many international students who took part in this research highlighted their disappointment with the quality of their online learning experience given the substantial investment they made to study in Ireland. In addition, they were dissatisfied with having to pay full tuition fees, due to not being able to avail of facilities, and to the lack of financial supports available to them. ELS students reported not having achieved the desired level of English due to their classes being delivered online, and not having had the interactions they would normally experience. For international students, the cultural and the social aspect of their time in Ireland is often equally as important as their learning experience. Unfortunately, the restrictive nature of the pandemic, particularly in terms of social interactions, has meant that many students have had far less opportunities to socialise. As a result, the research found that many students have not had the experience for which they had hoped. Finally, the findings raise overwhelming and serious concerns in relation to international students' experience with racism in Ireland. Students particularly highlighted anti-social behaviour from groups of youths and concerns with their safety. There were also reports of discrimination and difference in treatment in the workplace. In relation to reporting racist incidents that students suffered or witnessed, the findings showed that international students choose not to report racist incidents for several reasons. One of the main reasons for not reporting the incident is that students believe no action will be taken. Further reasons include not having proof, not considering the incident serious enough to report, not knowing where or how to report it, feeling too humiliated, language or communication barriers and not initially realising they were being subject to racism. The number of international students that mentioned feeling a lack of trust in authorities in relation to reporting racist incidents is also concerning and could be a reflection of a lack of legislation in place to address racism.

The findings from this report have highlighted many challenges that have faced international students in 2021 as a consequence of COVID-19 and with regards to their student experience. As Ireland emerges from the devastating effects of COVID-19, the education sector and research will play a crucial part in that recovery, and international students will no doubt have their part to play too. The student experience is one of the most important aspects of studying abroad, often helping to establish long lasting ties between the student and Ireland. When international students return to their country of origin, they serve as 'ambassadors' for Ireland. Many international students also remain in the State after graduation to work and contribute to the Irish economy. Ireland has the potential to be a world leader in international education and continues to be an attractive study destination for international students.

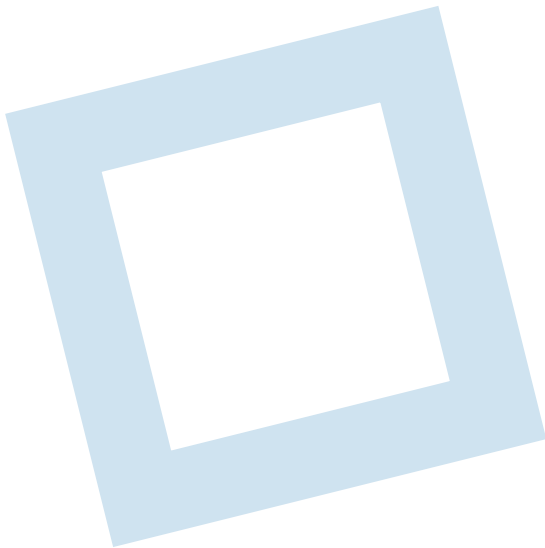
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Yet, the research showed that there are significant issues facing international students that need to be addressed if Ireland wishes to continue to enhance its global reputation as a destination for high-quality education. While some of the issues that were directly related to COVID-19 restrictions have since been resolved, there are still significant ongoing issues that were prevalent long before the pandemic. It is important, therefore, that the findings from this report are taken into consideration by policy makers, and that further research and discussion is carried out on steps that can be taken to help address or mitigate the challenges that international students face.

Based on the findings of this report, the following recommendations are proposed by ICOS:

- Retaining high calibre researchers and international students rests on having immigration policies that are consistent with this objective. A revision of the permissions given to PhD students and of the pathways to employment for all students is needed;
- There are notable benefits to online learning, yet many challenges prevent students from having an enriching experience. HEIs and English language schools must engage with students on developing suitable blended learning models;
- The Interim List of Eligible Programmes (ILEP) must be revised to reflect the changes that have taken place in higher education to ensure online and blended learning models are underpinned by quality until the International Education Mark (IEM) is fully operational;
- The digital divide has been often referenced during COVID-19, yet from an international student perspective, the pandemic has further highlighted the divide in terms of student supports. Resources need to be directed to international student services, in particular those dedicated to English language students;
- Ireland's new internationalisation strategy must have a clear focus on the rights and welfare of international students;
- Racism is a real and serious issue affecting international students in Ireland. The implementation of the National Action Plan Against Racism (NAPAR) should be complemented by all HEIs having policies in place to address racism;
- Health insurance is very expensive for international students and its requirement is a cause of much confusion. A possible way forward would be to remove non-EEA international students from the definition included under the Health Insurance Amendment Act 2019;

- Ireland has one of the lowest rates of overcrowding in Europe (Eurostat 2020) yet due to the cost of renting in Dublin, and other major cities in Ireland, many international students are forced to live in overcrowded conditions. The current legislation on overcrowding dates back to 1966 (Irish Statute Book 1966) and is clearly not fit for purpose. New legislation must be enacted to protect international students, and other migrants, from being exploited;
- Further investment in affordable purpose-built student accommodation is needed;
- Mental health surfaced as a major consequence of the pandemic. Ambitions to attract new international students to Ireland must be matched by sufficient resources to fund additional supports at HEIs and schools.



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