



Annual Report

2020



Contents

Chairperson’s Foreword	2
Strategic Goals.....	3
Achievements and performance	4
Media and Advocacy	5
Training	5
Online Engagement	5
Ireland Fellows Programme	5
Student Support.....	6
Research.....	6
Plans for future periods	6
Review of the organisation.....	7
Financial review	7
ICOS Board Members 2020	7
List of ICOS Members.....	8

Chairperson's Foreword

Since the last annual report ICOS has appointed a new Executive Director, Laura Harmon. Laura brings a wealth of experience and advocacy for student rights and has seamlessly slotted into her role. I thank Laura and her team for their hard work throughout the year.

I am grateful to my colleagues on the ICOS Board for their guidance and wisdom. The Board members give freely of their time and truly champion international students in their places of study.

ICOS is very proud of our association with Ireland's Fellowship Programme. This programme continues to grow in size and diversity, and it is fantastic to continue welcoming such a range of students to our country and academic institutions.

2021 has had a number of important milestones for ICOS. The organisation, in consultation with members, staff and students, developed a new 3 year strategy which will be formally launched in 2022. This was an extensive and challenging project, which gives the organisation a clear pathway to achieve our vision "that all International students in Ireland achieve their educational goals, are treated equitably by the education providers hosting them, and are valued by wider society".

There are still a number of areas where Ireland falls short of expectations regarding international students, and ICOS will continue to advocate for change where needed. The student accommodation crisis has not alleviated, students continue to experience difficulties when trying to register with immigration services, and ICOS research has identified a worrying level of racism towards international students. We also continue to campaign for affordable insurance for international Students.

The organisation is a member of five national forums including the High Level Group on Internationalisation. On these forums we actively represent the shared interests of members and international students.

Finally I would like to acknowledge and thank the teams in all ICOS member institutions who continue to work tirelessly to help our international Students during the COVID-19 pandemic. These teams have gone above and beyond to welcome and reassure our students, and guide them safely through their student experience in Ireland. As I write this we are still in the grips of the pandemic, but there are signs that there is light at the end of the tunnel. I hope that when I next pen this forward COVID-19 will be a memory and a true reflection of our resilience and fortitude.

The Irish 3rd level sector continues to rise to COVID-19 challenges, ICOS will continue to play a pivotal role in meeting these challenges, and be the key player in ensuring an excellent student experience in Ireland as we emerge from the pandemic.

Warmest regards,

Shane Mooney
ICOS Chairperson

ICOS' work is guided by its Strategic Framework (2017 – 2021). The Strategy was adopted by the ICOS Council at its AGM in 2017 after a period of consultation.

Strategic Goals

In its new strategy, ICOS has articulated four goals against which we will measure our achievements as follows:

1. INFLUENCE POLICY AND STANDARDS

Represent the shared interests of our members and international students to ensure we have a policy environment which is respectful of international students' rights and promotes practices and services that are underpinned by quality and good customer care;

2. BUILD CAPACITY AND VOICE

Strengthen the capacity of our members to deliver quality services to international students while also empowering international students to pursue their rights;

3. SUPPORT INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION

Support and showcase the important contribution of international education to international development;

4. STRENGTHEN OUR ORGANISATION

Re-brand and enhance our organisational profile and build a sustainable and well-run membership organisation that is responsive to change.



ICOS is contracted by Irish Aid to provide professional services in the delivery of Ireland's Fellowship Programme

Achievements and performance

Ireland's International Education Strategy, 2016-20 provides the backdrop for ICOS' activities with ICOS continuing to work with Government agencies, its member institutions and students themselves to support and advocate for good policy and practice in international education which will enhance the experience of international students in Ireland and build Ireland's reputation as a destination of choice for students seeking higher education opportunities outside their own countries.

Throughout the year, ICOS continued to be heavily engaged in providing appropriate advice to students and to member institutions on a range of issues including challenges in relation to Covid-19, accommodation, immigration matters and health insurance.

The cost of private health insurance for non-EEA students remained an issue of concern for ICOS. The high cost of suitable accommodation for all students including international students remained an important challenge throughout 2020

ICOS also contributed to stakeholder engagement with the Department of Justice on its statement of strategy and published a policy document with key asks during the 2020 General Election campaign.

In 2020 ICOS' continued its association with the Irish Aid Fellowship Programme through the provision of programme management services, an arrangement that will continue until mid-2021 under the current contract. ICOS provided on-going information support to Irish Aid as it conducted its own review of the Fellowship Programme in 2020.

ICOS had a number of staffing changes in 2020. In October, Sarah Lennon, who had been the Director of ICOS was replaced by a new Executive Director, Laura Harmon. In March 2020, ICOS recruited a Programme and Training Officer, Suzi Breslin.

In 2020, ICOS was able to deliver on the main components of its work programme for the year the key elements of which were the management of the Irish Aid Fellowship Programme, and the delivery of regular training and information services to members.

A detailed narrative description of ICOS activities in 2020 will be captured in ICOS' Annual Report 2020. The key achievements include:

- Continued representation by ICOS on national level groups concerned with international education strategy, policy, regulation and quality. In 2020, ICOS was represented on the following:
 - High Level Group on Internationalisation
 - Immigrant Information Network (IIN)
 - ACELS/QQI Recognition Committee
 - Alliance for Affordable Insurance for International Students

Media and Advocacy

The main topics and issues on which ICOS provided commentary in 2020 were private health insurance for non-EEA students, hate speech, accommodation, and immigration issues. In 2020, ICOS attended meetings with INIS and the GNIB where ICOS members' questions on student immigration policy and service issues were addressed.

Training

Despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, ICOS increased the number of training sessions delivered to 22, compared to 16 delivered in 2019. This was possible because of a shift to online delivery, and because a new Programme & Training Officer position was created, which has resulted in increased availability to deliver training sessions. These training sessions were delivered across 5 institutions around the country, with just under 1,300 attendees in total, 89% of whom were students.

Online Engagement

ICOS provided regular news and information updates to its members and supporters across the organisation's social media channels. In 2020, ICOS saw a significant increase in social media engagement, the number of 'likes' on Facebook reached 9290 representing a massive 43% increase on the previous year. ICOS' followers on LinkedIn more than doubled in 2020 jumping from 459 to 1041 by the end of year.

Ireland Fellows Programme

ICOS processed 214 applications for the Ireland Fellows Programme across its ten different strands. Ultimately 150 (+23% on 2019) fellows were offered awards in Irish higher education institutions; however, due to the pandemic, many opted to defer and others withdrew, resulting in 121 fellows being supported to commence studies in September 2020. As part of its contract with Irish Aid, ICOS also manages a dedicated website for the Ireland Fellows Programme available at <https://www.irishaidfellowships.ie>. This website greatly enhances the visibility of the Fellowship Programme and facilitates the transfer of information to all major stakeholders.

ICOS also supports the development of the Ireland Fellows Programme alumni networks managing a database of records and moderating a Facebook group which had 776 (+11%) followers and a LinkedIn group which had 170 (+27%) followers at the end of 2020.

ICOS provided administrative and welfare support for all new and continuing Ireland Fellows.

Student Support

In 2020, ICOS provided an information, advice, and mediation service through email only. The decision not to provide a telephone service was mainly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic as staff worked remotely. Furthermore, the demands for ICOS' services would have made it very difficult to manage a telephone service given current resource constraints. In total, ICOS saw a 49% increase in the number of queries, handling more than 1200. The majority of these queries were related to visa queries, but a substantial amount were in relation to disputes with English language schools over refunds, and the quality of online classes being delivered to students.

Research

ICOS also conducted a survey of international students to identify the challenges that students encountered at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak. In total, 1626 international students took part in the survey, of which 1114 (70%) were English language students, 484 (30%) were studying in third level education, while 28 (2%) did not say. 40% of surveys were completed in English, 29% in Spanish, and 31% in Portuguese. The survey revealed some stark realities of the many difficulties that international students faced in terms of their immigration status, accessing their rights, and accommodation.

ICOS held an online event in November 2020 to mark International Students' Day.

Plans for future periods

ICOS will continue to focus on delivery of its strategy which will be in its final year. A new strategy for 2022-26 will be developed. ICOS will also continue to fulfil its contractual obligations to Irish Aid on the management of the Fellowship Programme. The current contract will come to an end in June 2021 but ICOS are confident they will continue their very successful relationship with Irish Aid. ICOS will examine potential funding streams, consistent with its mission and strategy in 2021.

Review of the organisation

Since the year end, the organisation has had to deal with various matters of uncertainty such as COVID 19. This places many pressures on the organisation such as financial and governance risk. While funding is agreed up to 30 June 2021, no such assurances are in place for periods beyond this date. This poses a material risk for the organisation.

The organisation has also had to amend its operational strategy to conform to government measures in line with the public health recommendations in relation to “lockdown”. In order to conform to the likes of social distancing, increased hygiene etc., the organisation has had to amend its strategy to allow its employees to adhere to these requirements. Due to the uncertain outcome of when the pandemic is likely to pass, the organisation has no clear sight of when these measures will be relieved.

The directors will continue to monitor all public health and government updates to ensure that all information is available to make the best decisions for the organisation and its stakeholders. On the basis of the above, the directors are satisfied the organisation can continue as a going concern.

Financial review

In 2020, ICOS had income of €3,621,795 and expended €3,570,479 on the delivery of services resulting in a surplus of €51,316. This was significantly above the budgeted surplus of €2,401. ICOS' income is largely derived from its Irish Aid contract which in 2020 included direct expenses for fellows (€3,240,640) and an agency fee (€326,936). ICOS' income from membership fees amounted to €46,409 (+18.6% on 2019) and training service income increased from €6,675 in 2019 to €7,650 in 2020.

ICOS Board Members 2020

Shane Mooney
Monica Freiband
Sally-Anne McIver
Francis Kelly
Audrey Byrne
Cliona Campbell
Claire Doran
Holly Cowman
Arnaud Teyssou
Louise Staunton
Caroline Mangan
Marie Lyons

List of ICOS Members

Athlone Institute of Technology
Ballsbridge College of Further Education
CCT College Dublin
Champlain College Dublin
Cork Institute of Technology
Dublin Business School
Dublin City University
Foundation for International Education
Galway Mayo Institute of Technology
Griffith College
IBAT College
ICD Business School
IES Abroad
Institute for Study Abroad
Institute of Art, Design and Technology
Institute of Technology Carlow
Institute Of Technology
International School of Business
Limerick Institute of Technology
Mary Immaculate College
Maynooth University
National College of Ireland
NUI Galway
Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland
TU Dublin
Trinity College Dublin
Union of Students in Ireland
University College Cork
University College Dublin
University of Limerick
Waterford Institute of Technology



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