

International Student Forum



Participants and facilitators at the ICOS & USI International Student Forum, The Global Room, Trinity College Dublin, 21 April 2017

Dublin 2017

ICOS unites over 30 members working together to ensure that international education policy and practice in Ireland is quality-driven and remains firmly focused on the educational and social needs of all students. Our joint vision is that all international students who come to study in Ireland achieve their educational aims and are valued and treated equitably by the institutions that host them, and by the society in which they live and work.

Athlone Institute of Technology	IT Tralee
Ballsbridge College of Further Education	Limerick IT
Champlain College Dublin	Mary Immaculate College, Limerick
College of Computing Technology	Maynooth University
Dublin Business School	National College of Ireland
Dublin City University	NUI Galway
Dublin Institute of Technology	Royal College of Surgeons
Dun Laoghaire IADT	Trinity College Dublin
Foundation for International Education	Union of Students in Ireland
Galway-Mayo IT	University College Cork
Griffith College	University College Dublin
IES Abroad	University of Limerick
Institute for Study Abroad - Butler	Waterford IT
International School of Business	
IT Blanchardstown	
IT Carlow	Individual (Honorary) Members
IT Sligo	Ms Alice Grattan Esmonde
IT Tallaght	Professor Brian McMurry

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RATIONALE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENT FORUM

In October 2016, the Department of Education and Skills published a new international education strategy, 'Irish Educated, Globally Connected: An International Education Strategy for Ireland, 2016–2020'. The new strategy reflects on the aims and achievements of previous strategies and asserts that "International Education in Ireland is a success story" as "the targets set for full-time international student recruitment and economic impact were exceeded." The quantitative data provided by this report supports this statement, with estimations of the economic contribution of international students to Ireland's economy amounting to a minimum of €1.55 billion per annum, outperforming the target of €1.2 billion.

With increasing numbers of international students, how are Irish higher level institutions (HEIs) performing in terms of delivering a high quality student experience? International student forums conducted by ICOS and USI are designed to complement data on the student experience generated locally by institutions themselves and nationally through instruments such as the Irish Survey on Student Engagement (ISSE) and the International Student Barometer. With a focus on qualitative data, it is hoped that ICOS and USI forums will provide useful insights on the experience of international students in Ireland.

CONTEXT OF THE FORUM

Student Accommodation

In early 2017, European Commission-funded research was published revealing that Ireland performs extremely poorly across a number of indicators in relation to accommodation for international students. The HousErasmus+ research revealed that nearly 77% of respondents who studied in Ireland found housing to be more expensive than they had expected, while almost 30% reported experiencing fraud or attempted fraud. 12% of respondents who had studied in Ireland reported experiencing discrimination when searching for accommodation.¹ In addition, there is a current unmet demand for student bed spaces of approximately 25,000, rapidly rising rents and international student numbers are expected to rise by 27% by 2019.²

International Students' Well-Being

ICOS members have reported a significant increase over the past year in the number of international students in particular who are facing difficulties that require additional supports, such as those provided by college counselling services. Furthermore, ICOS is aware of similar difficulties being faced by institutions in the English Language sector.

1. HousErasmus+ (2017). How Universities Accommodate Generation Erasmus. <https://houserasmus.eu/sites/default/files/HOUSERASMUS%20article%20from%20ICO2020%20Mag.pdf>

2. Higher Education Authority (2015). Report on Student Accommodation: Demand and Supply. http://www.heai.ie/sites/default/files/student_accommodation_report_310815.pdf

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- The high cost of accommodation is having a negative impact on international students' experience, with many having to travel large distances to attend classes and experiencing a lot of stress each year when searching for suitable and affordable accommodation.
- Students' experiences of support from their institution's international office varies considerably. There was general consensus that greater assistance is required to help students find suitable and affordable accommodation.
- Students reported that they were often unclear about what service on campus they can turn to in different situations. Many felt 'bounced around' between services when they sought help.
- Many participants have found it difficult to make friends with Irish students. Most only have friends who are also international students, and therefore they do not know anyone with local knowledge who could give them advice.
- International students can be uncomfortable with the levels of alcohol consumption at college events. Many feel unsafe or unwelcome at such events and therefore do not attend, which can lead to isolation.
- Many of the students complained about the high cost of living. One student reported having to forgo being a vegan, as it was too expensive

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The international offices of higher level institutions urgently need additional capacity and resources in order to assist international students to find suitable and affordable accommodation, and to cope with the increased demands for their services.
- Greater efforts should be made to alert and inform international students prior to their arrival in Ireland of the signs to look out for that an accommodation listing may be fraudulently advertised.
- HEIs need to engage more with providers of private purpose-built student accommodation on the issue of affordability, while maintaining high standards.
- While orientation events for international students at the beginning of the academic year are often very helpful, further information events in November/December would help raise awareness and remind students of the various support services that are on offer.
- There should be greater coordination across student support services so that students do not feel 'bounced around.' Increased efforts to provide clearer information on pathways for advice and support would reduce the barriers to accessing such services for international students.
- International offices should take the lead in exploring and encouraging the option of more alcohol-free student events to ensure a variety of campus social opportunities at which all students can feel comfortable.



PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Country of origin:

Canada
India (3)
Iran (2)
Kazakhstan
Malaysia (2)

Mexico
Nigeria
Singapore
Spain (2)
Turkey

USA (2)
Venezuela
Vietnam (2)

Institutions represented:

Dublin Business School
Dublin City University
Dublin Institute of Technology
Griffith College Dublin

Kaplan International English
Maynooth University
National College of Ireland
NUI Galway

Queens University
Trinity College Dublin
University College Cork
University College Dublin

Level of study:

Participants were studying on courses at level 7, 8, 9 and 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications, and one student was studying on an English language course.

Length of time in Ireland:

Two-thirds of participants had been in Ireland for less than two years at the time of the forum, while two had been in Ireland for 2-3 years and five for more than 3 years.

Age:

Half of participants were between the ages of 20 and 24, six were aged 25-29, and two were aged 30-34. Two of the participants declined to report their age.

Gender:

Fifteen of the their participants were female, while five were male.

ACTIVITY 1: FOCUS ON ACCOMMODATION

The aim of this activity was to encourage students to think primarily about two different aspects of accommodation:

1. To determine what are the positive and negative aspects in terms of the availability, quality and affordability of the student accommodation that they are currently living in.
2. To identify what facilities purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) should have.

What are the positives in relation to availability of accommodation in Ireland?

Many participants reported having received assistance from the international office at their institution and they were therefore able to find accommodation quickly. Others used social media and websites like Daft.ie to help with their accommodation search. One student mentioned an accommodation website specific to their institution which they had found helpful.

There was general agreement that it is positive that their accommodation comes fully furnished, and many were pleased that a lot of accommodation offers a private, single, en-suite room and shared kitchen/living space.

What are the negatives in relation to availability of accommodation in Ireland?

Those who did not receive assistance from their international office reported that accommodation was difficult to source. One reported staying at a hotel for an extended period of time as a result. It was reported by some that they found accommodation particularly hard to find online from outside of Ireland.

Two students reported encountering suspected scams. Both were asked to pay upfront - one into a foreign bank account - without viewing the property or meeting the landlord.

Some students reported experiencing discrimination in attempting to access the private rental market. One student reported that, after searching unsuccessfully for a year, he had to ask an Irish friend to sign a lease and then sublet the accommodation from this friend. Another spoke about her landlord's concern about the smell of her food. Others spoke of prices increasing from those advertised when they met landlords in person.

Some landlords have generally shown inappropriate behaviour towards students. E.g.: One landlord advertised for female students only. However, the landlord (who would be living in the house with the students) was male; this made the female student uncomfortable about the potential motive of the landlord to ask for female students only.

Some students complained of only being able to find accommodation far away from their school. Others reported not being able to find the accommodation type that they wanted.

What are the positives in relation to the quality of accommodation in Ireland?

Many students welcomed the fact that their accommodation came fully furnished and that they had access to a kitchen, kitchen utensils, a washing machine, a clothes dryer, a shower, heating, and a fridge/freezer.

What are the negatives in relation to quality of accommodation in Ireland?

Students complained of mould, dampness, and poor insulation. Others complained that their accommodation was old and tired-looking. Many struggled to keep their accommodation warm, while others complained of the cost of heating their accommodation. The facilities provided, particularly kitchen facilities, varied considerably, with some reporting insufficient fridge/freezer space and rusty utensils.

For some, the living space available was not sufficient. In one case, a student reported having to share a double bed with a friend because they were unable to find affordable accommodation near their institution that would provide them with their own single bed.

Students in purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) complained that there were not enough washing machines for the number of students - in one case there were 5 washing machines for 300 residents. There were also complaints that use of the laundry facilities often came at a significant additional cost, meaning that students could not wash their clothes as frequently as they would like.

What are the positives in relation to the affordability of accommodation in Ireland?

The main positive for the students was that accommodation comes furnished. Others reported that the location of their accommodation close to shops such as Lidl/Aldi/Tesco helped with their budgets.

What are the negatives in relation to the affordability of accommodation in Ireland?

Most students reported that they found their accommodation expensive and unaffordable, especially given the costs they are already facing in terms of course fees, high transport costs, and the €7,000 they are required to have in their bank account when applying for their visa.

Many commented that they felt that the lack of availability of accommodation is driving prices up, that their rent increases every year, and that they need more help and support to find affordable accommodation.

Some students reported searching at some distance from their HEI in order to find suitable and affordable accommodation. In one instance, a student is commuting daily from Belfast to attend classes in Dublin city centre, which she reports works out cheaper despite the travel costs. It was agreed that living in Ireland means giving up on something: quality or convenience.

ACTIVITY 2: FOCUS ON WELL-BEING

This activity was broken up into two parts. The aim of Part 1 was to simply ascertain what issues international students face that impact negatively on their general well-being.

In Part 2, participants were split into groups and each group was then presented with a scenario. The participants were asked to respond to the scenario in their groups. The aim of Part 2 was to identify how a student would feel in this situation, their awareness of the different support services that are available to them, and how they would respond in this scenario.

Part 1: What are some things students (especially international students) have to cope with?

- Homesickness
- Being accepted
- Acclimatising
- Language barriers (including understanding accents)
- Adjusting to new foods
- Work-life balance
- Academic expectations
- Managing money
- Integration
- Networking
- Building friendships
- Travelling from home
- Working in Ireland and finding a job
- Cultural differences
- Leaving your comfort zone

Part 2: Scenario discussion

Sunita is a student in your class. She and 3 other people have been assigned to work with you on a group project. Mid-way through the project, the group observes that Sunita is not looking well. Two days pass by and she has stopped coming to class. When you phone Sunita to find out how she is doing, you find out that she is very sick but has not gone to the doctor and does not know what to do.

What kinds of stress factors are impacting on Sunita? What would you advise her to do?

Responses from participants:

Stress

- Does the student have medical insurance?
- How does the healthcare system function?
- There are long waiting times in the hospital.
- Where is the hospital?
- How much will treatment cost?
- Will transportation to the hospital cost a lot?
- The school assignment is stressful.
- The nature of the student's illness is unknown.
- Will the minimum insurance coverage be enough?
- Would a medical claim be successful?

Solutions

- Contact student health centre
- Seek support from chaplaincy service
- Seek support from student services
- Seek support from student union
- Talk to classmates
- Establish a support circle (friends)

PARTICIPANTS' COMMENTS

"Accommodation is expensive and tough to find. It's tough to find when you're searching in your home country, and it isn't much easier searching while you're here because you'll need a place to live in the meantime anyways. Student accommodation services do not seem to go beyond the accommodation office of the university, even if you do happen to be in a different situation as an international student."

"Our situation just doesn't seem to be made aware of, it isn't easy to find accommodation from halfway across the world. And believe me, it isn't fun to be couch surfing if you come before accommodation is secured. As an international student, there will be cultural misunderstandings and gaps, so it'd be nice to find somewhere that wasn't a digs. Just to have somewhere that you can hide away in your own little spot when you're homesick or just need to get away from the Irish lifestyle for a bit."

"I was very lucky to be able to find accommodation on campus at my University. [...] However, I will be in Ireland for 4 years and after the first year I must leave my room. I have to go home to do fieldwork for three months and I have no place to leave my stuff, plus when I come back I have no idea where I will be staying since I won't be able to go see places until I'm in Ireland again."

"The issue with accommodation is highly stressful. I would like to be able to find a clean, safe place and be sure that I can stay there for the next three years without having to move out at inconvenient times or having to pack up all my things every single time I want to go home for a while. I would also like to have the option to live with a local family. This would be very helpful to learn more about how life in Ireland really is, and it might help to feel less lonely."

"The international office doesn't seem to have much of a say in matters of accommodation, especially on campus. Reaching out to the international office only helps you get redirected to accommodation services. If you know where that is located then good, if not, then you'll be provided a map. It would be useful if the international office had more control in the area of accommodation."

"This topic [mental health and well-being] is very sensitive for many of us and we have so many experiences and details to share. I also think that by listening to others we realised that many people are going through the same problems, which made me feel both discouraged and understood at the same time."

"When I arrived in Ireland I immediately had the impression that people were very helpful overall. [...] However, I soon realised that locals don't interact much with international students. I have never been invited into an Irish home or to spend time with them. All my friends are international."

"Many times during my time in Ireland I have felt stressed, anxious and depressed. I also find it very shocking that mostly all social activities include drinking alcohol, even though my decision not to drink has been respected I have had to deal with drunk people being dangerous. I feel vulnerable most of the time because I don't know which areas of the city might be sketchy, so I stay home most of the time."

"I think they do a good job at the orientation week, however there are so many questions throughout the year. I had an experience in Canada where they had counsellors that helped students in their native language. This might be good to explain things about immigration or health insurance."



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