

# Consulation on Ireland's Internationalisation Strategy: Report on the Findings from the ICOS and USI International Student Focus Groups 2013



**GALWAY**



**CORK**



**DUBLIN**



## ICOS and USI International Student Focus Groups, 2013

### Background

The Government's Action Plan for Jobs 2013 included a commitment that the Department of Education and Skills (DES) would carry out a short, focused review of Ireland's international education strategy. On foot of this, in August 2013, DES published a Consultation Paper seeking written submissions from sector interest groups on the implementation of the strategy. In addition, DES consulted with the Irish Council for International Students (ICOS) regarding capturing the views of international students in the review. With DES support, ICOS and USI subsequently undertook the coordination of three student focus groups which were held in Dublin, Cork and Galway in late October and early November.

This is a synthesised report of the findings from those focus groups.

### Methodology

ICOS and USI worked closely with student unions and international offices in higher education institutions (HEIs) to ensure that the diversity in the international student population was represented in the focus groups. Attention was given to achieving an age, nationality and gender balance in the groups as well as having students studying at different levels as well as pursuing a range of different courses. Participation was open to both EU and non-EU students. It was decided that Irish students should also take part as the perspectives of both Irish and international students are particularly important when considering some of the questions that needed to be addressed.

3 regional focus groups were organised and overall ICOS met with 58 students studying in 17 different HEIs. Discussions were held in the evening and lasted approximately 2 hours.

Date	Location	No. of students attending	No. of HEIs represented
22 Oct	Trinity College	23	13
24 Oct	UCC	15	3
06 Nov	NUIG	20	1

Students' engagement in the discussions was excellent and yielded some rich data. Ice-breakers were used to good effect at the beginning of each session to break down barriers and small sub-groups rather than larger plenary session facilitated the maximum participation of those present.

See appendix 1 for further breakdown of participation in the focus groups.

### Findings

The focus groups set out to ascertain students' opinions on Ireland's educational offering with the first part of the discussion looking at motivation and expectations and the second part looking at overall experiences as an international student in Ireland.

The findings are presented under key questions which were asked in each session.

## SECTION 1: MOTIVATION AND EXPECTATIONS

### **1a) what factors influenced your choice of Ireland as a destination above other possible destinations?**

Numerous factors influenced students' decision to choose Ireland as a study destination. Ireland being an English speaking country was a strong pull factor. In addition, its geographical location, history, openness and relatively small size were also discussed as being important – students spoke about being easily able to travel to other European countries from Ireland. Some had been to Ireland before and had wanted to return.

Partnerships between their institutions in Ireland and their home country colleges also provided study abroad opportunities in Ireland. Others were influenced by recommendations from family and friends, e.g. Ireland's friendly people, interesting culture and high education standards and international student friendly campuses. Students felt reassured to know that an Irish educational qualification would be recognised in their home country and globally – many felt that they would be considered "*high quality graduates.*" Double degree options, scholarship availability e.g. Science without Borders and shorter duration of programmes e.g. Medicine is 6 years in Ireland compared to 8 years in other countries were also pull factors.

A small number of students said that it was relatively easy to obtain a student visa for Ireland which helped influence their decision. However, this was not the experience of all – see page Q 3a, Page 7. For a minority of US students, Ireland was attractive as it was cheaper than studying at home.

### **1b) were you influenced by international rankings in choosing your college?**

Some students were influenced by Ireland's performance in international higher education rankings - especially for graduate programmes. For others, Ireland's reputation rather than the college's played a greater role. However, course choice/options were predominantly the most influential factors.

### **2a: Have you worked in Ireland during your studies?**

The majority of students have not worked during their studies – for many this was because their studies are their priority. Some students who had worked or who had attempted to get a job mentioned that it has been very difficult to get a job in the economic climate (since 2009). A minority of students had engaged in employment such as bar staff and unconventional jobs e.g. as an extra on a set. Those who are here for a short duration (1 year or under) were less likely to seek work. Some Study Abroad students would like to have the option to work.

### **2b: How do you find the work concession for non-EEA students?**

Students felt that their right to work for up to 20 hours per week during term is a fair amount of time. However, the majority of students who want to work said that "*employers do not want to hire non-EEA students on a student visa*", as they prefer to employ Irish and other EU students as it is perceived to be less bureaucratic. Many employers want workers who have experience working in Ireland – this can be a catch 22 for the students.

It can also be hard to find a job for just 20 hours per week. Some participants felt over qualified for typical student jobs such as retail and restaurant work.

### **2c: Do you have any ambition to stay in Ireland after you graduate?**

With regard to long-term plans to stay in Ireland, it was noted that it is more difficult for non-EU students in terms of work permits and working rights.

Some students said that they would like to stay in Ireland after their graduation but *“there is not a lot of support or pull to stay.”* It is very much a case that non-EEA (European Economic Area) students must really act on their own initiative if they wish to stay. Some students would stay if they could find a decent job related to their course. However, they realised that this is difficult to achieve in Ireland’s current economy and depends largely on their field of study. For some, in addition to missing their family, Ireland’s high cost of living and poor exchange rate were disincentives to remain.

Others would gladly stay if they got funding to do a PhD.

### **3a) Do you have any comment on how Ireland might retain the most highly skilled international graduates?**

*“Show us you want us or we will go back.”*

In each focus group, students felt that one year for the Graduate Scheme was an insufficient attraction to remain in Ireland. The majority said that the Graduate Scheme should be extended to two years to give graduates adequate time to find long-term employment – this would be a greater incentive for skilled graduates to stay on in Ireland. Some participants also suggested that there should be an easier path for citizenship and a relaxation of work permit rules. One student’s opinion summed up the overall sentiment: *“No one is asking or luring me into staying.”*

It was noted that companies should have better links with colleges and target international students for employment and actively advertise opportunities. Better pay and working conditions and more assistance in finding direct employment and making the transition to working in Ireland post studies would help graduates who wanted to stay on. Students felt that this would also help prevent them from being discriminated against for not being from the EEA. One student said that it would help to *“remove the tiered consideration system.”* If there were more jobs and fairer merit based policies, skilled graduates would be more inclined to stay: *“Job opportunities should be qualifications based.”* Further study opportunities via scholarships would also entice students to stay on. There should be greater connections between Irish colleges and colleges abroad.

Many students suggested that internship opportunities should be optional for all programmes. Considering the challenges in securing long-term employment, one participant recommended that university places for international students should be capped to match jobs opportunities.

If Ireland is serious about retaining skilled graduates, it was suggested that *“companies should see past visa status and acknowledge the wide range of skills which international students bring”* including: language, cultural and foreign business practice. More entrepreneurship from international graduates should be encouraged.

## PART 2: EXPERIENCE AS AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT IN IRELAND

### **1) Think about your journey from the initial application and admission to arrival, induction and academic and social supports along the way – how could things be done better?**

Some students reported on inconsistencies in information provided by university departments. At times, there was poor information regarding deadlines for course applications. A Norwegian student spoke about having to make 2 applications. She also experienced bank draft problems after she could not make a payment online: *“Having to make plenty of phone calls wasted my time.”*

Applicants who applied via the CAO felt that they were given insufficient notice on the outcome of their application in order to make preparations for moving to Ireland. They also were not informed how points from leaving certificate exams sat in their home country were assessed. One student said that *“different points systems are not shown on the websites. Admission took a long time due to different processes.”*

Some said that there was a lack of communication between administration offices in colleges. One student reported on conflicting information between Government and college websites.

A number of participants felt that clearer pre-arrival information would have been beneficial as they found preparing to arrive stressful. Some experienced delays in receiving replies to their emails and phone calls as college staff were on holidays over the summer period. *“This made all of the paper and application work more difficult as there was not much support.”*

One Nigerian student spoke about how the International Office successfully supported him in appealing his initial student visa rejection.

A small number of students said that it would be better if colleges would allow students to pay fees in two instalments due to the very high non-EU rate.

Participants reported on finding orientation programmes organised by their International Office as very useful. They have found the international office to be *“a good port of call”* when they have questions on a wide range of issues from immigration to health. However, a small number of students encountered problems due international office staff not being available.

One student spoke about bad planning as registration clashed with his classes and he had to miss a lecture. Another student was late in registering with the GNIB due to his college delaying in issuing his student card.

In Dublin, the majority of students spoke about the lack of accommodation options due to major availability problems. They would have liked more assistance from their college in finding a room.

From the outset, the majority of students found their lecturers to be supportive and felt that they could ask questions. This made it easier to adapt to the Irish academic system/learning methods.

## **2a: Are you happy with your level of contact with Irish students?**

The vast majority of students in Cork and Galway were happy with their level of contact with Irish students. As these cities are smaller, it is easier to interact with more people. However, in Dublin, over 60% of students were not happy citing reasons such as relationships being *“superficial”* and *“not going very deep.”* Cultural differences such as the pub and party culture in Ireland were also raised. It was suggested that more social events should be organised by colleges for both international and home students, including events not revolving around alcohol. Some felt that their international office could do more to support integration. Many Irish students already have established social circles in their college from the outset and are therefore less interested in making friends. Equally, *“many international students already know each other before class and have a tendency to hangout.”* *“It is easier to stay with what you know”* for both home and international students. In Dublin, for example it was noted that Brazilian students tend to stay together. Some participants felt that international students are more open to integration than Irish students as they are already living in a different country.

For some courses, the divide between international and home students was very evident in classes where international students tend to sit on one side of the classroom and Irish students on the other. An age divide was also apparent sometimes with undergraduates being more socially reserved than postgraduate students. It was suggested that lecturers need to make a greater effort to promote integration by mixing Irish and international students for projects and mixing the seating arrangements. One Pakistani student said that *“forced integration has to be done sometimes.”* He said that he would always talk to other Pakistani and international students first even if they have nothing in common.

Buddy programmes were discussed as being very effective e.g. in NUIG (National University of Ireland, Galway) by both Irish and international students. However, in a couple of colleges such schemes had been dropped and students were dismayed by this when more needs to be done to promote cultural diversity/exchange. The Connect 2 programme in UCD (University College Dublin) was mentioned as being very useful.

*“There needs to be more exposure and integration with Irish students.”*

As integration is a two way process, more Irish students should be encouraged to join international societies. One Irish student said that the International Student Society should change name as Irish students presume that the society is irrelevant to them due to its title.

One student said that while she found Irish people to be friendly that *“there is a need for social events without alcohol.”* Students discussed how more effort to start and maintain friendships was required as *“many Irish students go home on weekends.”* A number of students felt that there is a lack of interest and a stigma associated with befriending international students.

## **3a: What has been your experience outside of college in terms of immigration, accommodation and health services etc?**

The vast majority of students spoke negatively in terms of their **immigration** experiences in Ireland. They found the process of registering with GNIB (Garda National Immigration Bureau) *“time consuming, expensive, complicated, frustrating and repetitive”* and suggested



the process could be simplified. Many said that it should be possible to get everything done in one go and that GNIB cards should be linked to course duration rather than having to register on a yearly basis. Students who were already in Ireland in 2012 when the registration fee increased by 100% were appalled by this. The multiple re-entry visa cost of €100 was also considered as expensive. Students often experienced delays in opening an Irish bank account which meant they could not register with GNIB on arrival. The requirement to have €3,000 in the bank is difficult. People on loans and scholarships have no bank statements which made the situation more problematic. The entire GNIB registration process added unnecessarily to the pressure students were already under on arrival.

It was suggested that consideration should be given to having a reduced registration fee for students as the majority are not working and are already paying large fees.

Having only one immigration officer in Galway was deemed as not enough as clients are rushed. Despite having friendly staff, the immigration office in Cork was described as “*inefficient*” with long waiting times/queues and no proper system. Finger printing delays the process.

In terms of customer service, some students found immigration staff to be “*suspicious, judgemental, prejudiced, rude and unwelcoming*” even when all of the necessary documents were provided. One student said that she was in fear of being deported if she did the wrong thing. Major delays were also experienced in getting the outcome of their student visa application – with some having to wait over four months.

Students also questioned why the GNIB card could not be accepted as valid ID.

In Dublin, students were worried by the lack of Garda presence on the streets which made them concerned for their **safety** - “*Police presence is a joke.*” “*There are not enough guards; I do not feel safe.*” Many felt that minors frequently created unsafe situations. Some students said that they experienced racial slurs on a daily basis and were in fear of being attacked; this occurred in the areas where they lived. Others noted that Dublin’s “*drugs problem needs to be tackled.*” In Cork and Galway, no participants had experienced racism. However, they were aware of it happening to friends in other counties –including instances where friends had to go to the Gardai about it.

**Accommodation** was another cause of distress for many students; especially in Dublin due to the major rental property deficit. Students found that “*some companies have a monopoly of the rental market*” and this needs to change. Many companies and landlords do not rent to students - especially international students. Students often felt pressurised into taking the first accommodation which they were offered as they were afraid that they would not find something else.

Accommodation options in Dublin were very expensive and some students found themselves living in unsafe areas due to availability issues and little knowledge of which areas are safe prior to arriving. A lot of the socially unacceptable behaviour reported above occurred in disadvantaged areas where students found themselves unwittingly living.

Study abroad students who are in Ireland for just one semester reported that finding short term accommodation was even more challenging. In the NUIG, students found staff in the Accommodation Office helpful, however, they were critical of some staff working in college accommodation who were not very helpful despite the high prices paid. Some students

could only afford to go for a twin room due to affordability issues. Having to pay up to 6 months in advance also created difficulties for some students.

Discrepancies in campus pricing for accommodation of similar quality and size were also noted. International students were often housed together which “ghettoizes” them and prevents integration with Irish students.

In Cork, two students found accommodation to be disorganised with not enough checks/inspection for quality and a lack of reviews. University College Cork (UCC) should advertise all accommodation options – and not just campus which tended to mainly be presented. Victoria lodge ranked high.

In the private rented sector, it was also noted that there are a lot of “cowboy landlords” offering small rooms for poor value. Pictures are often misleading. Some reported having to share one bathroom with up to six others with the internet not working properly.

**Healthcare** on campus was perceived as being good for minor and common illnesses. Campus nurses were well equipped to deal with clients. However, any students who had to be hospitalised or visit A&E found it to be costly (especially the €100 fee) with long waiting times. Students felt that there was a lack of clarity as to where patients should go to. There is also a perception that medical card holders are dealt with quicker.

Student health insurance was costly especially on top of other expenses such as immigration fees.

### **3b: Do you think that international students are valued for their contributions to Ireland?**

*“We pay more and there is less opportunity for us here.”*

A small number of participants felt that they are viewed in terms of the income they generated from studying in Ireland e.g. living costs, accommodation and high tuition fee rates. They know how financially important they are to Ireland. Yet at times, they felt that they were on the “lower tier” in terms of rights – especially regarding immigration and working rights and as such were often perceived as being “tourists.” At times, they also felt that they were viewed as having secured a place in an Irish college because of their “high fee rate” and not because of the grades which they achieved in their home country.

*“We have to pay extra for everything and yet no benefits for employment opportunities.”*

In Cork, overall students felt that the Irish are welcoming. Postgraduate and PhD students felt that their research is valued. However, it was noted that in other countries postgraduate studies count towards long-term residency. In Galway, students spoke about home students being interested in hearing their perspective on global issues. A Brazilian student spoke about being invited to participate in focus groups and meetings with Students Union and could see changes taking place based on her suggestions. She also felt valued by receiving a lot of invites to events.

It was apparent that the students studying in Cork and Galway felt valued above just being economic units compared to students studying in the Dublin region.



### **Have you felt welcome or experienced any particular difficulty?**

In the Dublin region, students' perception of feeling welcomed in Ireland depended largely on their accommodation location with some students reporting that they had been racially abused. In Cork and Galway, everybody felt welcomed and found Irish people to be friendly overall.

In all 3 focus groups, in cases where students had peer mentors this made a big difference in helping them to settle in.

Other difficulties mentioned include Ireland's expensive living costs; especially compared to home countries. The constant pub/party/alcohol culture was felt hard to avoid if one wanted to socialise. In Galway, a small number of students found drivers to be "*completely disrespectful towards pedestrians and cyclists.*" Not having family here made life harder. It was reiterated that the entire immigration registration process and cost impacted negatively on all of their experiences.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Overall, the majority of international students who participated in the focus group discussions have had a positive experience in Ireland to date and feel that they are receiving a quality education. However, there is room for improvement in some areas of the student experience including admission information and processes.

The experience of students studying in Dublin and those studying in the Cork and Galway regions varied a lot in terms of integration and accommodation with the racist incidents reported in Dublin being a particular cause for concern. Other issues which stand out are the lack of quality accommodation for students in the Dublin region and the negative experience in all regions of the GNIB registration process.

Regarding staying on to work in Ireland after graduation, it was clear that non-EU students did not feel particularly encouraged or incentivised to stay and felt more could be done to break down barriers to employment in Ireland both real and perceived. An extension of the 1-year Graduate scheme to two years was a specific recommendation as well as counting students' period of post-graduate study in Ireland for long term residency.

Students enthusiastically engaged in focus group discussions and appreciated being asked to give their opinions. The focus groups also provided students with a networking opportunity which was also appreciated.

**Acknowledgements:**

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Finally, ICOS would like to thank DES for providing the funds and the opportunity to coordinate these discussions with students. Education in Ireland also kindly supported through some small gifts/prizes for attendees.

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## Appendix 1 : Profile of Participants

Students from 17 colleges participated in the focus groups:

- Ballsbridge College of Further Education
- Cork Institute of Technology
- Crumlin College
- Champlain College, Dublin
- Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology
- Dublin City University
- Griffith College Cork
- Griffith College Dublin
- International Study Institute Dublin
- IT Blanchardstown
- IT Tallaght
- National University of Ireland Galway
- National University of Ireland Maynooth
- Royal College of Surgeons Ireland
- Trinity College Dublin
- University College Cork
- University College Dublin

The following 19 countries were represented by focus group participants:

Albania	Korea
Brazil	Malaysia
Canada	Nigeria
China	Norway
Ethiopia	Pakistan
Germany	Slovakia
Holland	Somalia
India	Tanzania
Iran	USA
Ireland	

Undergraduates	64%
Postgraduates	36%

Female	52%
Male	48%