

ICOS' NEW STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK: 2012-2016

BACKGROUND TO STRATEGIC PLAN

Evaluation of ICOS' 2009-2011 strategic plan found that ICOS' members as well as external stakeholders' value and respect the work of ICOS and are keen to see ICOS continue to develop as a key independent agency which uniquely focuses on the rights and welfare of international students.

"The need for an organisation advancing the rights and welfare of international students continues to be deemed critical to ensuring quality experiences remain centre stage in progressing international education policy, strategy and practice"

Helen Newman, "Evaluation of ICOS' 2009-2011 Strategic Plan"

For many members, ICOS' work is more relevant and necessary than ever in the context of the publication, in recent years, of a range of national policies as well as the imminent implementation of an International Education Mark (IEM) which is part of the quality framework for the promotion of Ireland as a destination for international students. The national policies which are of particular relevance to ICOS' work include:

- Investing in Global Relationships, Ireland's International Education Strategy 2010-2015
- The National Strategy for Higher Education 2030
- New Immigration Regime for full-time non EEA Students (2011)

At the same time, a substantial part of ICOS' work and its core funding (70% +) derive from fellowship management services provided to Irish Aid. ICOS was successful in securing a further 3-year contract from Irish Aid which gives the organisation essential financial security to the end of 2014. ICOS has built up considerable expertise in this area over many years and is recognised for the quality of its service provision informed by its excellent understanding of students' needs and its thorough knowledge of the higher education sector in Ireland. From a policy perspective ICOS continues to argue for the special place of fellowships in capacity building for development while also supporting Ireland's drive to increase the numbers of international students coming to Ireland for higher education on a fee paying basis. Ireland's recently released (May 2013) Policy for International Development, "One World, One Future" strongly endorses the role of fellowships and promises to "substantially" expand the Irish Aid Fellowship Programme which suggests that ICOS' fellowship services will remain very relevant for the foreseeable future.

ICOS' 2012 evaluation also found that members appreciate and place a high value on ICOS' services which are designed to strengthen members' own capacity to deliver high quality support services to international students. ICOS' services include the provision of training, information and advice as well as the facilitation of networking and learning opportunities for good practice exchange. However, the evaluation also pointed to the potential for ICOS to develop its service offering for members including finding ways to facilitate the more systematic exchange of good practice across the sector.

Direct work with international students strengthens ICOS' mandate and legitimacy and gives it authority to talk about and represent the international experience. However, this part of ICOS' work remains the most challenging due to lack of resources and ICOS is mostly associated with direct services to Irish Aid supported fellowship students rather than to the international studentbody as a whole. ICOS will need to clarify its role in relation to support of international students generally and pursue opportunities to build alliances and work collaboratively with student organisations and other bodies in order to maximise its impact.

VISION, MISSION, VALUES AND GOALS

ICOS 'VISION:

ICOS' 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 the wider society in which they live and work.

ICOS' MISSION:

"ICOS' MISSION IS TO BE THE LEADING INDEPENDENT ORGANISATION ADVOCATING FOR THE RIGHTS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN IRELAND. ICOS WILL COLLABORATE WITH ITS MEMBERS, STUDENT ORGANISATIONS AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES 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"

VALUES:

ICOS believes that better outcomes are achieved when students and those who support them are consulted in decisions which affect them;

ICOS values the skills experience and professionalism of staff working with and for international students in higher education institutions;

ICOS believes in collaborative working and is open to working with public and private sector organisations as well as NGO's and individuals who share our goals and hold similar values;

ICOS believes that it is most likely to achieve its goals as an organisation if it adopts a learning culture and opens itself to change while also maintaining high standards of accountability and transparency.

ICOS' GOALS

ICOS has identified four strategic goals which will guide its work over 2012-2016

GOAL 1:

TO INFLUENCE NATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES IN ORDER TO OFFER GREATER PROTECTION TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND ENHANCE THEIR EXPERIENCE IN IRELAND.

Why do we want to do this?

Ireland's International Education Strategy, published in 2010, was widely supported across the sector. The assertion in the strategy that, "Ireland must offer a high-quality education, strong integration with domestic students, and an unparalleled experience that adds significant value to the career outcomes of all who are educated here " was one that ICOS strongly identified with and had advocated for. However, the pressure for results, measured in economic terms, has meant that progress has been slower and investment less evident on elements of the strategy that focus on international students themselves and the quality of their experience.

The enactment of the Education and Training Act (2012) and the formal establishment of the Quality and Qualification Ireland (QQI) will now, it is hoped, drive the changes that are necessary. The proposed International Education Mark (IEM) when operational will offer much needed guidance and protection to international students seeking to identify suitable courses and providers in Ireland. While QQI has started the process, there will be a need for independent organisations and voices like that of ICOS with a broad mandate and a student focus to ensure that the quality regime that is introduced will stand up to the highest scrutiny and operate in students' best interests.

Designed to complement and support Ireland's International Education Strategy, the new Immigration Regime for non-EEA students introduced in 2011 provides the context for other elements of ICOS' policy work. While broadly welcoming the new regime, ICOS also pointed to some elements of our immigration system which are insufficiently transparent or do not represent a fair deal for international students. In addition, while some improvements have been noted in customer services including in the visa regime for international students, it is clear from student feedback that engagement with our immigration services is still one of the least positive aspects of international students' overall experience in Ireland. HEIs too are less than happy with the overall service and wary about INIS' tendency to introduce policy and system changes with little reference to those most affected by those changes. It is clear ICOS will have a continuing role to play in supporting students and institutions to have their voice heard.

ICOS will **focus** its advocacy and lobbying work in two priority areas:



GOAL 2

TO WORK WITH IRISH AID AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS TO DEVELOP FELLOWSHIP PROGRAMMES AS EFFECTIVE TOOLS FOR CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT IN IRELAND'S KEY PARTNER COUNTRIES AND TO CONTRIBUTE TO A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THESE PROGRAMMES IN IRELAND.

Why do we want to do this?

The long running collaboration between ICOS and Irish Aid on the Fellowship Training Programme contributes to the public good and demonstrates the true value of international education. Carefully selected individuals are given the opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills and international experience which will benefit their organisations and communities when they return home. Host institutions in Ireland and the participating programmes gain from increased exposure to the ideas of the South. ICOS benefits in terms of continuity of funding through payment for services and valuable experience through direct contact with international students and host institutions at an operational level.

ICOS has negotiated a new contract with Irish Aid for the 3-year period 2012-2014. The new contact will involve the management of additional fellowship schemes including the IDEAS programme which is designed to facilitate experience and knowledge exchange between Ireland and Vietnam.

ICOS' work on fellowships will **focus** on the following:

Successful Participation on Irish Aid Fellowship Schemes of High Quality Candidates

- Deliver effective and efficient fellowship support and selection services to Irish Aid.

Functional Fellowship Alumni Network

- Manage data base and maintain online alumni infrastructure.
- Produce regular alumni newsletter.

Increasing Public Awareness of Fellowship Value

- Contribute to research, policy debate and public awareness on the role of fellowships in international development.
- Contribute to research, policy debate and public discussion on the role and value of fellowships in international education.

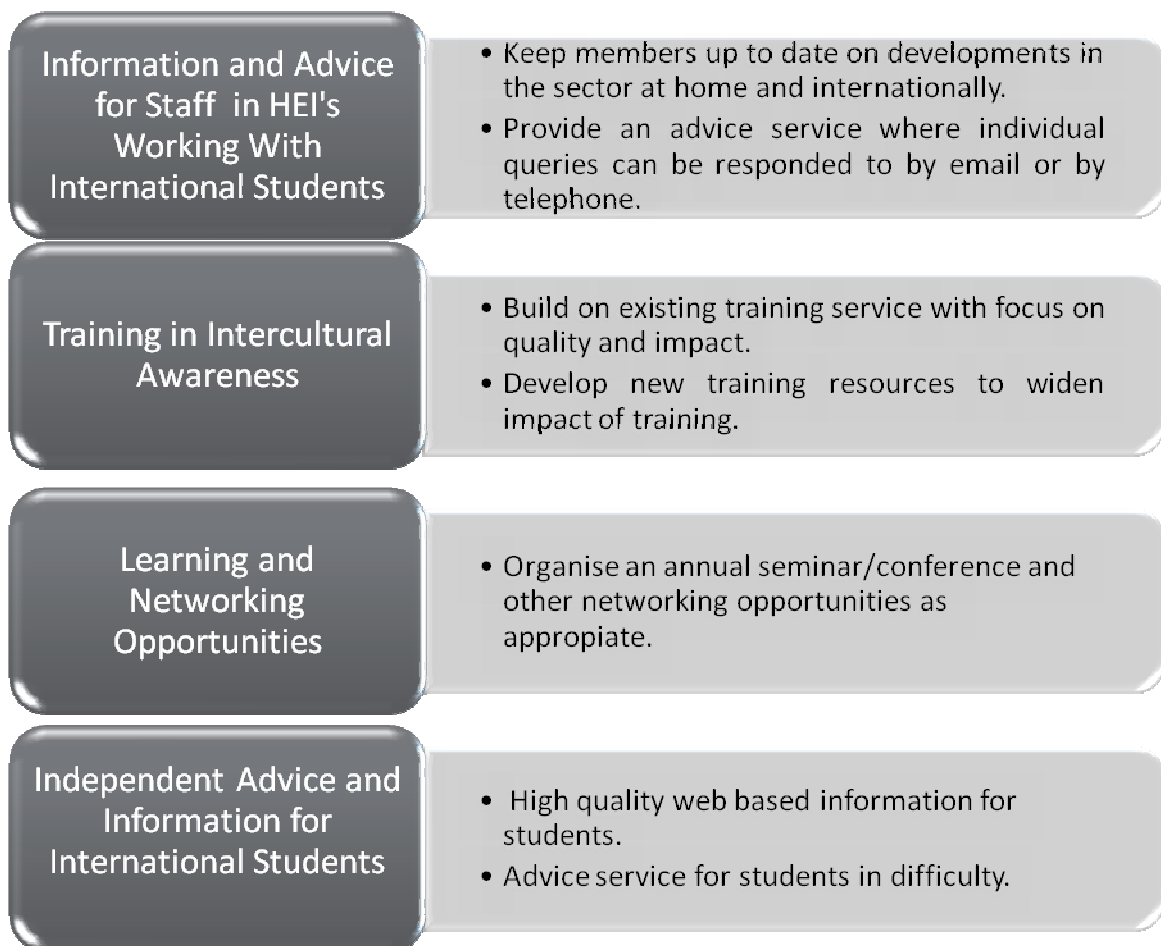
GOAL 3:

TO STRENGTHEN THE ABILITY OF OUR MEMBERS TO DELIVER APPROPRIATE AND QUALITY SERVICES TO THEIR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WHILE ALSO PROVIDING INDEPENDENT INFORMATION AND ADVICE DIRECTLY TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS.

Why do we want to this?

Against a backdrop of on-going Government austerity, public funding for essential services including higher education is unlikely to keep pace with demand. As a result, there is more pressure than ever on institutions to make up short falls and increase revenue through attracting more fee paying international students. "Doing more with less" has become the norm as staff both teaching and supporting international students seek to maintain high standards of service with reduced resources. In this context, ICOS has a continuing role to play in providing a reliable source of essential information for staff working with international students as well as a forum for learning, networking and reflection on important issues. International students in turn need a source of independent information and advice and somewhere to turn when in difficulty as well as platform to have their voices heard.

ICOS' services to members and students will **focus** on the following:



GOAL 4:

TO ENHANCE ICOS' EFFECTIVENESS.

Why do we need to do this?

While ICOS enjoys many advantages, a strong reputation, a skilled staff and an excellent office facility, it has up to now, not sufficiently addressed weaknesses in its current financial model and risks to its future sustainability. The organisation remains over reliant on one source of income which has in turn impeded its development and independence and this needs to be addressed as a priority. Part of any remedy will be the strengthening of the Board and governance structure of ICOS and the achievement of charitable status. ICOS will also review its systems and processes on an on-going basis and seek improvements where possible. A broadening and deepening of its engagement with members was identified as a particular area where ICOS could develop.

ICOS will **focus** its capacity building in the following areas:

Strengthened Engagement with Members

- Develop a plan for both internal and external communications and review systems.

Diversify Funding Base

- The board takes a leadership role in developing a new financial model for the organisation.

Strengthened Board and Updated Constitution

- Review the skill mix on the ICOS Board.
- Review and change ICOS current Memo and Articles of Association so that they are fit for purpose and facilitate achievement of charitable status.

Evaluation

- Monitor and gather feedback on activities on an on-going basis.
- Annually report on and review achievement of objectives and make adjustments where necessary.
- Review this strategy after 2 years and carry out an external evaluation after 5 years.