

*Submission to the Minister for  
Education and Science*

*From the Irish Council for  
International Students*

***Promoting Ireland as a Centre of Excellence  
in International  
Education: some Observations and  
Suggestions***

***The Irish Council for International Students (ICOS)***

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***Introduction***

The Irish Council for International Students (ICOS) warmly welcomes the Minister's initiative in establishing an interdepartmental group to consider the best way forward for international education in Irelands, which will build on the achievements of this important sector of our education system to date. It hopes that from this work will emerge a clear long-term Irish policy on international education, with the structures and resources necessary to implement it, which will be to the benefit of students, educational institutions and the wider Irish society.

ICOS hopes in particular that its own role and activities can be integrated in an appropriate way with the new developments at national and institutional level, enabling closer interaction than has been the case in the recent past. Ours is an organisation dedicated since 1970 to the overall welfare of international students in Ireland, with a central goal of enhancing the quality and benefits of international education here, and the Council's specific profile, its knowledge, direct practical experience and capacity for development can all contribute significantly to the new initiatives. So we trust that the working group will actively consider ways in which this ICOS contribution can be made.

Our submission first provides a brief outline of the organisation, its background, make-up and current aims and activities. It then goes on to consider some specific aspects of the government's general proposal to expand and develop Ireland's international education activities, referring to and questioning some of the assumptions in the Department's *Background Note*, and concentrating on those issues where ICOS' own brief and perspective - as the only national-level organisation focusing on the experience and needs of international students in Ireland - can be of most value. Thus it does not comment on 'branding' mechanisms, nor on the overall administrative structures most likely to facilitate effective sectoral development.

ICOS hopes that its comments and suggestions will be helpful at the start of the process, and looks forward to an opportunity to discuss the issues in more depth with members of the interdepartmental group, and to provide further information as appropriate, in due course.

## ***What is the Irish Council for International Students?***

**Foundation :** ICOS was established by the Irish universities and churches in 1970 in consultation with, and financially supported by, the Department of Education, under whose auspices it initially operated, providing a broad range of services to support international students and international educators in Ireland, primarily in the third level sector. A subsequent invitation to administer the Ireland Aid Fellowship awards meant that its administration grant was switched to the Department of Foreign Affairs, although its full range of activities (advice and information for students, exchange of information among member institutions, seminars and conferences on relevant issues, policy and good practice development at national and institutional level etc.) continued unchanged.

**A network of relevant institutions and practitioners:** Currently there are 45 institutional representatives on Council (*see appended list*), almost all holding posts directly related to international education activity, in all the Irish universities, the majority of the Institutes of Technology, and the major independent third level colleges<sup>1</sup>. This network has enormous potential as a consultative body of professionals on the ground, with a role to play in information-gathering, developing best practice and implementing new initiatives.

[It should be noted that ICOS' aims and activities are undertaken primarily in relation to students in post-secondary and tertiary education. Issues specific to English language schools have not been taken up, except where there are concerns common to all institutions and all international students, e.g. the question of non-EU student employment. One English language school has become a member of the ICOS Council, but with the understanding that sector-specific issues are best dealt with by its own representative body MEI/RELSA..]

**Role of ICOS:** The staff of ICOS have a wide range of expertise, and its track record means the organisation is viewed by many international students, by journalists, researchers and the staff of other relevant organisations, as a reliable and independent source of advice and information. Student Services staff in many institutions contact ICOS in relation to staff training programmes or when developing an institutional response to a difficult situation affecting international students (the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> being a recent example). An ICOS contribution is frequently invited by statutory and other bodies seeking to include international student issues and perspectives in broader initiatives (such as the EU Year Against Racism, Garda Intercultural Initiative, Department of Justice conference on immigration policy 2002 etc).

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<sup>1</sup> Unlike IEBI /HEDCO, with which it has common features of structure and history, ICOS membership is drawn from institutions in the Republic of Ireland only. International student issues in Northern Ireland are the remit of UKCOSA: the UK Council for International Education, while Fellowship-related activities are handled by the British Council.

**Expertise in relation to international students:** ICOS Council members are professionally involved in day-to-day work with international students, and in international programme management, and ICOS' staff have substantial "hands-on" experience through their work on Fellowship Programmes, advisory and information services and events such as the ICOS-run International Student Forums which provide feedback on current student experience and issues.

**Capacity and potential:** Apart from its potential as a network for promoting good policy and practice across the sector and enhancing the contribution of staff of the International Offices to developments, ICOS has the capability – given additional secure funding - to develop its current range of specialised services for the general benefit of the international education sector.

- \* It has the capacity to design and carry out or supervise **research** with international students, home students and staff (e.g. the 'racism report' 1998)<sup>2</sup>
- \* It can mount **conferences** and produce **publications** such as those which recently focused on Chinese Students in Ireland<sup>3</sup>;
- \* It is ready to develop its advice and information activities into a regular phone "**advice line**" for students and their advisers, and to produce regular **email information bulletins** for international student advisers in the colleges;
- \* It can broaden its existing programme of **training and information workshops** for international student advisers (in areas like immigration regulations, cultural issues, student welfare issues, professional development etc);
- \* It could work with college **student unions** to support their 'internationalisation';
- \* It is available to manage **Fellowship/ scholarship programmes** for other government Departments, as it has in the past (long track record of EU and UN work)

**Organisational ethos:** Finally, with its emphasis on ethical recruitment – expressed for example in conferences and publications in the 1990s<sup>4</sup> - its central concern for international students and the quality of their experience, as well as its conviction of the academic and cultural benefits of a whole-hearted internationalisation process, the work of ICOS offers a valuable independent yet supportive perspective which can inform and enhance the overall profile of Ireland as an international education centre of genuine excellence.

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<sup>2</sup> Boucher, G. *The Irish are Friendly, But... a Report on Racism and International Students in Ireland*. Published and with an introduction by the Irish Council for International Students, Dublin 1998.

<sup>3</sup> *Chinese Students in Ireland: New Opportunities, New Needs, New Challenges: papers from the ICOS seminar January 26 2001*. Published by the Irish Council for International Students, Dublin 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Including Conference 1990 and publication on *Recruiting and Responsibility*, ICOS, Dublin 1991; *Responsible Recruiting: a Code of Practice*, compiled and published by the Irish Council for International Students, Dublin 1992; Conference proceedings, *Issues in International Education*, ICOS, Dublin 1996.

## ***Issues involved in developing and expanding international education activities: ICOS' observations and suggestions***

The current focus of government interest and initiatives in relation to internationalisation is on increasing the numbers of non-EU students paying high or ‘full-cost’ fees to study in Irish educational institutions, as a means of generating revenue for the third-level sector and increasing the productivity of the language-teaching sector. It is clear from the analysis and current figures available from IEBI and from the Fitzpatrick report (as quoted by the HEA Chair at a recent conference in Cavan<sup>5</sup>) that a substantial increase in absolute numbers is certainly feasible within a relatively short time. So what are the main issues that the interdepartmental group should focus on when considering how to design and implement this process? ICOS would like to put forward the following points for consideration:

**1. Balancing marketing and recruitment with long-term investment in the institutions:** At the outset, ICOS would urge caution in relation to moving too fast on new and intensive recruitment strategies, and encourage a long hard look at the total investment required at national and institutional level if the desired end is a *sustainable*, and not simply a short-term, increase in participation by international students, and if the wider benefits to the State and its citizens of greater internationalisation of Irish education (some of which are sketched in the Department’s *Background Note*) are to be achieved.

Investment is definitely needed, as the background paper notes, but for long-term success, which depends hugely on satisfied student ‘customers’ there has to be investment in areas other than marketing and recruiting, notably in what, in trade terms, could be called ‘after-sales service’ – the level and quality of support, both academic and social/ cultural, that is available to the student customer to enable him or her enjoy the best possible overall experience and value for money. Word of mouth, as is well known, is one of the most potent marketing tools in the global student market.

An infrastructure for some aspects of this support (stronger in relation to general welfare and student services, and weaker in terms of development of academic staff, information services, policy and procedures on discrimination and other aspects) is already in place in many Irish third level institutions, where excellent service is being provided by dedicated staff who, however, are often overstretched. Not all colleges have this infrastructure, and all will need to enhance their human resources and competencies, develop their curricula and build up their physical resources (such as accommodation) if they are to adequately accommodate and educate larger and more diverse intakes and if they are to succeed in competing for the very best students internationally.

Some serious consideration has to be given to the ways in which colleges will be able and will be encouraged to utilise profits from their recruitment activities for

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<sup>5</sup> *International Education: a Capacity-builder for the Island of Ireland?* conference organised by the Centre for Cross-Border Studies, Cavan, May 2003. ICOS presented a paper on the experience of international students.

such purposes, and about the desired range of supports to students' academic and social/personal development which should be in place. The ICOS membership would be well placed to inform this latter discussion.

In summary, a national or institutional strategy devised primarily to 'balance the books' while depending on present staffing levels and infrastructure to provide necessary support is likely to be short-lived and of little benefit to its stakeholders.

**2. Monitoring other countries' strategies and results:** As well as looking at sheer numbers, it will be essential for Ireland to monitor closely the experiences of students and staff in other countries which have recently embarked on aggressive marketing campaigns, such as the UK and New Zealand. There is evidence to suggest that in some institutions recruiting may be running too far ahead of investment and causing student dissatisfaction. (Some of this evidence to date is anecdotal, but the recent high-level governmental discussions between New Zealand and China on safety of Asian students in New Zealand are not.)

Other countries' experience (and our own in so far as the information is available) may throw light on the question of **international students' post-third level destinations**. The background paper makes assumptions about their likely return (hence benefiting Ireland in terms of future trade and tourism) but in the absence of formal obligations (such as operate in Fellowship Programmes) and in a globalised labour market, these assumptions may be outdated. The Chinese government is known to be alarmed at the extremely low rate of return of students it has encouraged to seek their education abroad in recent years!

Other areas where investigating experience elsewhere (and gathering it from Irish institutions, if retrievable) would be valuable include questions of international students' **academic success and failure**, relating to their qualifications on entry and influential academic and social factors affecting them.

**3. 1 Developing thinking about interculturalism and cross-cultural understanding:** By now there is sufficient experience from a wide range of countries to show that the mere presence in the classroom of students from different backgrounds will not of itself increase understanding or tolerance (sometimes the opposite!) and that friendships and social links across cultures do not naturally arise from simple proximity.

The presence of international students is a huge potential gain to our institutions, far beyond the merely monetary, but if we want Irish students to learn from their presence, and this gain to inform the whole of future society then strategies have to be put in place to foster these developments. This means making academic and cultural difference both explicit and valued, and treating it as the subject of analysis and reflection within the overall educational process – and this inevitably requires human resources and training, in the context of genuine institutional commitment.

**3.2 The issue of ‘clustering’:** In this context it is worth considering the potential downside of over-dependence on a limited number of readily accessible ‘markets’ – China, India, Japan and so on – from which students are recruited into a limited number of disciplines into institutions which are themselves often relatively small (some Institutes of Technology, for instance). The ‘clustering’ effect that results may not be beneficial in terms of either academic or social learning of home or international students.

Since this is going to be the recruiting reality for the short-term, institutions need support and advice to address these potential difficulties, which have not hitherto been experienced on this scale (though over the years there has been widespread reporting of the difficulty of ‘integrating’ the groups of Malaysian students traditionally attending Irish universities for medical education, for instance.)

**4. Understanding current perceptions – the place of international students in the campus community:** worries are often expressed to ICOS about the difficulties of ‘integration’ of international students in Irish third level colleges. This suggests a commonly-held view of the institution which implies that it does not have to change or respond in any way to its changing student population, merely find means to assist the students to change and adapt as fully as possible to its current forms of organisation, curriculum, teaching/learning styles etc, most of which were devised in a different context and based on the centrality of the home students’ needs (often excluding the new dimension of globally-valid professional skills and knowledge).

The influence of this model of the institution, often held unconsciously by many academic and administrative staff, is confirmed by the perceptions of many international students (both EU and non-EU) that their colleges see them as marginal elements, passing visitors who consume the educational products on offer, often require unanticipated amounts of additional support (for which staff are not rewarded) but do not have an equal status with the home students whose education is seen as the core purpose of the institution.

This is not simply a matter of a clash between the public/ societal mission of a third level institution and the idea of trade in educational services. The question of whether or not international students are accepted and treated in all respects (not just in the Equality Statement) as equal members of the campus community will affect the long-term overall health and productivity of the institution and its ability to deliver wider benefits to its home students as well.

ICOS hopes that the interdepartmental committee will consider ways in which essential issues such as this, which go to the heart of the internationalisation project and require long-term attention and commitment, can be addressed by the institutions. If they are not supported in doing so, the loss will affect Irish students as well as their non-Irish peers.

**5.1 Analysing obstacles to mobility/ recruitment: the need for greater coherence of policy and practice between Government Departments.** ICOS, like many of its member institutions, has seen the need for Departments to work together more closely and effectively to ensure that frameworks of regulations etc support the recruiting process and the ongoing welfare of international students post-arrival. Among issues outstanding are: clarification of health entitlements and health insurance requirements for non-EU students and provision of schemes which do not require a lengthy ‘waiting period’; generation of clear and comprehensive information on student visa requirements; improved banking arrangements (including student loan systems) and provision of adequate and affordable personal insurance.

The interdepartmental group and any subsequent supervisory body will need to have the authority to address such issues and bring about speedy resolutions.

**5.2 Obstacles to recruitment/ mobility: broader societal issues.** In view of the international competition, it would be unrealistic for Ireland to pin its hopes of attractiveness on simplistic perceptions of the country and its people (unspoilt landscapes, friendly people, live music everywhere...). There are major issues requiring to be tackled at the highest levels of government, and their existence will be known to the more aware and sophisticated international students (the ones we would like to attract for our own benefit), who will read the *Rough Guide to Ireland* as well as the lyrical prose of recruitment brochures, and will carefully weigh up the pros and cons and value for money of study in Ireland rather than elsewhere.

The explicit levels of **racism** in some areas of Irish society (mostly off-campus) are one such issue which can have very negative publicity effects. Institutions could balance this by a vigorous implementation of policies and procedures designed to outlaw racism and discrimination of all kinds on campus, but this will require resources. And government has a major leadership role to play here.

[In relation to international students’ perception of Ireland as a ‘safe country’ for study, it would also be unwise to assume in the marketing context that information freely available from government agencies such as the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) and from NGOs such as Amnesty International, is out of reach of the more resourceful prospective students.]

The serious **housing issues** affecting Irish cities are also a major disincentive, and horror stories abound in student circles. Colleges need to be in a position to make better commitments on accommodation to their international students, and should be supported to provide more secure and *affordable* accommodation for their international students, since it is clear that the private rented sector cannot deliver this satisfactorily at present.

**The cost of living** in Ireland (including accommodation, and cost of health care for non-EU students) is a factor that needs to be carefully considered in comparison to other EU countries and competitor recruiting countries. There are not many substantial concessions available for students, so if the comparisons are to Ireland’s disadvantage, what counter-balance can be offered?

**The cost of studying** in Ireland, which involves relatively high tuition fees which can rise unpredictably, alongside an absence of loan systems and almost no sources of financial support for non-EU students, must be seen as a factor affecting Ireland's competitiveness. The criteria for international students (and their parents) involve stability and predictability of costs, and reasonable flexibility of payment arrangements (instalment plans etc). Institutions also need to utilise some of their fee income to provide adequate hardship funds for exceptional cases – it is no-one's interests that students fail to complete due to circumstances beyond their control (for example Malaysian students in Ireland affected by the currency crisis of the late '90s.)

**5.3 Obstacles to mobility: cuts in funding to higher education and in research funding:** The knowledge that funding to higher education has been cut for this academic year, and the 'pause' in the Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions are both potentially very damaging to the perception of Ireland as a centre of excellence in higher education (as well as to Ireland's research capacity generally) and will work counter to recruiting strategies. Research funding cuts in particular means less potential to recruit and fund top-level postgraduate researchers – an important element in internationalisation strategies. The interdepartmental group must acknowledge this difficulty and the need for more coherent national policy-making in relation to higher education overall.

**6. Questioning comparative advantage: is the language factor in our favour?** Traditionally thought of as one of the main attractions of Ireland for international students, this may be a diminishing asset, as more and more European countries (not just Nordic states) are offering a wide choice of university courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels taught through English, in a low or no fee environment. Ireland needs to monitor these developments carefully and consider strategic responses (one strategy would be to focus on courses and research degrees where the English-speaking environment and Irish social context offer a significant advantage).

[The question of relatively 'safe' study destinations has been mentioned at 5.2 ]

**7. Data and research issues:** those responsible for developing strategy at national and institutional level will benefit from more comprehensive information, quantitative and qualitative, on the current situation and trends regarding international students in Ireland.

[ICOS itself was the provider of the fullest statistics on international students in the years up to 1992, and has been one of the few contributors to the hitherto sparse field of research in this area.]

More detailed and reliable statistics will be needed (though there have been significant improvements recently) and substantial and well-funded research needs to be undertaken, on many aspects of the academic and personal/ social experience of international students, the experience of those teaching and

*(data and research issues continued)*

supporting them, and the perceptions of their Irish student peers, who are a major influential factor on international students' experience.

Adequate resources are key to establishing an information and research focus to inform the ongoing project of internationalisation at national and institutional level.

**8.1 Ethical issues:** ‘brain drain’ is a significant issue not touched on by the interdepartmental group. Yet the Chinese government has expressed huge concerns recently about the percentage of returning students, and there is long-standing concern about the morality of Western economies teaching and retaining the best scientists, medical staff etc from countries in the majority world.

This is surely a question that should concern Ireland, given its long-standing involvement in the development of poorer countries, its commitment to international education initiatives such as ‘Education for All’, and the ethical stances taken at the UN etc in relation to many human rights matters.

The potential tensions need to be addressed explicitly, and a long-term policy of balance needs to be developed on this issue, probably in conjunction with the Department of Foreign Affairs (Development Cooperation Directorate).

### **8.2 Ethical issues: élite foreigners and disadvantaged home students?**

Alongside the global issue of brain drain is the issue of the tensions between a recruiting strategy which targets the rich and élite from outside Ireland, while higher education institutions are being encouraged to develop access and supports for students from socially and economically disadvantaged groups within the country. It will be very important to explore sensitively the likely outcomes of this for the student body on campus.

As already noted, recruiting of high fee-paying students can bring imbalance in terms of countries of origin, and debate is needed on this, alongside consideration of a more diversified approach for the future. Do Irish education institutions want to see a concentration on Asian and American students and an almost total exclusion of students from Africa and Latin America? What is the right balance?

Diversification would also be an ‘insurance policy’. Many international educators remember the hopes pinned on Kuwait as a source of students in the late 80s and early 90s (and the ‘trade missions’ there) which crumbled with the Gulf Crisis of 1991, itself producing new issues in relation to the emergency needs of international students already in Ireland at that time.

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**8.3 The benefits of scholarship programmes:** as part of the overall developments proposed, Ireland should consider models from some other strong recruiting countries which as part of their overall strategy have a competitive scholarship programme for talented international students, often with a range of different co-funding arrangements between State, institution and student.

Such a scheme is distinct from development-focused training schemes such as the Development Cooperation Ireland Fellowships, and can be a cost-effective way of raising the country's profile and generating students' interest in the education on offer, as well as addressing some of the issues of mix and balance.

[It is worth noting that ICOS and IEBI receives enquiries every day of the week asking about possibilities of funding support for international students in Ireland!]

**9. Quality assurance and related issues:** on the important question of quality assurance, there is perhaps a danger that QA mechanisms target the quality of educational and support services etc. in a too-narrow focus, scrutinising processes and 'products' in relation to home students only. If 'quality marks' or similar are to be developed in relation to international education, it will be important to include the perspective of international students themselves, and to find ways of benchmarking the overall quality and thoroughness of internationalisation in the institution (curricula, staff training accommodation, student services etc.)

Countries such as the UK and New Zealand have put in place *Codes of Practice* on standards in the recruitment and support of international students, as a central part of their marketing strategy. The Irish Council for International Students developed, by consultation among the member institutions, such a *Code of Practice on Responsible Recruiting* for Irish third level institutions 10 years ago. Much of its material is still relevant, and it could usefully form the basis for a new 2003 Code which could be put in place as part of the quality promotion effort.

**10. Joined-up thinking: Ireland, Europe and the world.** This is an area worthy of much fuller consideration, but in summary, it will be crucially important to Ireland's long-term success both educational and economic, that the different strands of educational policy and educational developments and reforms in Ireland are seen as parts of a complex whole, rather than developing in isolation.

Ireland needs to avoid the tendency, noted in the results of the third EU Commission survey of progress towards the Bologna objectives (*Trends III*), of focusing so hard on its links and activities with the US and Asia that it fails to recognize the many possibilities within a rapidly expanding Europe.

There are many intersections and potential synergies between EU educational developments and the expansion of recruiting/ marketing activities, as highlighted perhaps in the principles underlying the forthcoming ERASMUS MUNDUS programme. They too should be a subject of the thinking process that the interdepartmental group will be undertaking.

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