

# Listening to the Experience of International Students in Ireland

Report of a Forum of International Students  
held in the University College Cork, on 22nd February 2012

Co-ordinated by ICOS and USI



## **Acknowledgements**

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Finally, special thanks are due to all the International Students who participated in the forum and shared their views so openly.

# Listening To International Students - Cork Forum

Following on from [November's "Listening to International Students" Forum in Dublin](#), the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and the Irish Council for International Students (ICOS) hosted a similar event on the campus of University College Cork on Wednesday, 22nd February, 2012.

The forums recognise the importance of providing regular and genuine opportunities for international students to reflect on their own experience and to share their insights with those most interested in their wellbeing and welfare while they are in Ireland. The findings of the forums are intended to complement feedback from students gathered in other ways such as through student surveys. International student forums also support ICOS and USI to appropriately represent international students' views when it comes to policy development and improvements in student support services.

The forum was attended by 30 students from a variety of countries and provided a good chance to discuss issues of importance to their studies and overall experience in Ireland. Students from University College Cork (UCC), Cork English College (CEC) and IT Sligo attended. A number of students were studying in UCC for a semester as part of their US degree.

The forum, opened with a presentation by a Malay student, Aiman Asyraf. He is a fourth year medical student in UCC. A world café style format gave attendees the opportunity to discuss issues in a supportive and relaxed environment and allowed participants the flexibility to move to different tables depending on their interest in a particular topic. The evening closed with a fun raffle with prizes sponsored by Education in Ireland followed by a reception.

Feedback from students on the night was very positive. Participants enjoyed having the opportunity to meet and engage with others who have had similar experiences. They also felt that their opinion was being valued.

Discussions on the night focused on the following issues:

- 1) Immigration
- 2) Support from Colleges (including clubs and societies)
- 3) Integration
- 4) Academic Experience

## 1) Immigration

Students noted that the Cork immigration officers were friendly and students on shorter stays did not experience any major problems. However, some serious questions were raised by international students regarding the system itself. The immigration service is the first public service which new international students encounter and it is important to ensure that this service is efficient and friendly.

Many students called for a more transparent and predictable immigration regime and it was generally felt that the universities could help by providing students with more information. Currently, the experience at the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) and visa customer services seem to vary from place to place and from applicant to applicant. Inconsistency of outcome and treatment causes confusion for new students and needs to be addressed. Visa costs, re-entry visas and time involved were some of the problems highlighted.

Some of the international students' experience and attitudes are captured in the following quotes:

*'We are international students and it is hard to know what to expect'*

*'The length of the visa is frustrating, it would be nice if the 150 euro would last for longer. Trying to figure this stuff out when trying to be a student and do work, is very stressful.'*

*'Garda: Supportive attitude.'*

## 2) Support Systems

Positive aspects regarding support services included the International Office whose induction sessions were noted as being invaluable. Social events organised by International Offices made it possible to meet other international students. It was felt, having easy access to information on college websites and brochures also contributed to making settling in easier. Clubs and societies were regarded as having an important support role to play.

A number of students criticised their college's support system at times. Some students felt there should be more support from the lecturers and a course guide should be given before arrival.

For others, clearer advice from the college on healthcare would be very beneficial. It was stated that an explanation of the health system in the university should be provided, for example, regarding the appointment procedure. Also, health insurance should be explained.

There were some suggestions on how support systems could improve. One suggestion was for a longer and more in depth orientation which would include information about health care, description of clubs and societies and information about the Irish academic system. Another suggestion focused on the need for a quality mentoring system for students that would be available throughout the year and not just during the first few weeks.

The following quotations capture the views of students:

*'More support from teachers'*

*'More information about societies and when meetings are being held so that we can get involved.'*

*'International office is very helpful'*

### **3) Integration**

Feedback on integration with home students was mixed. Many attendees noted that it was easy to make friends with Irish students whom they described as being “friendly” and “actively helpful.”

However, for other students, integration with Irish students was challenging. It was noted that Irish ‘cliques’ do not want to mix with international students. It was felt that accommodation offices could mix international students with Irish students in order to facilitate integration. Also, lectures/teaching time could be better used to support integration through the adoption of more discussion based activities and group work.

Students felt there was a greater need for more orientation to aid integration. Some students noted that their orientation programme only lasted a single day while they felt they would need a week. The orientation programme should cover all aspects of life in Ireland, for example, transportation, medical system, purchasing phones, shopping information and country information/websites. It was felt that if students had all the required information, they would not find the process of settling in so stressful.

Many of the comments made were positive, focusing, on the friendliness of the Irish people. A positive point, acknowledged by all, was the large amount of clubs and societies. International students found this a great way to interact with Irish students and they enjoyed getting involved in something they already had an interest in.

The following quotes summarise the feelings:

*'The buildings are modern and spacious for studying. People are polite and lots of clubs and societies are a major plus.'*

*'Arrival package to help with support system before arrival to help reduce stress when adjusting.'*

*'Challenging to meet others in the class – not much interaction during class and everyone leaves right away after class. Perhaps helping facilitate more networking time.'*

#### 4) Academic Experience

Feedback on courses, which attendees at the forum were undertaking, was mixed. Even though, overall, attendees are enjoying academic life here, communication with lecturers is an issue which impacts on participants' academic experience.

A number of students felt that when they approached department staff they were unhelpful and as a result this prevented them from maximising their potential. Some remarked that the lectures did not give attention to international students during class discussions and did not consider the language differences. Attendees felt that ways to improve the situation would be to have more tutorials for international students and for lecturers to speak more slowly. Many students felt that a mentoring system would be beneficial as they would have someone to ask the 'silly questions'. Also, this would be an opportunity to meet other Irish students and staff.

Students commented on the learning approach. It was noted that methods used by lecturers were anti-social as they did not promote discussion or integration. Also, the assessment is exam centred and students did not get to opportunity to submit assignments to evaluate their understanding. A number of students felt that there was insufficient pre-departure information and when they arrived, orientation was vague. Students had problems with timetables, websites and there was a lack of time and assistance in the process of figuring out classes.

However, a number of students did see it as a good opportunity to make friends from other countries and appreciated the relaxed atmosphere of the academic system. The PhD and MA students noted that they were supported effectively and the resources provided, such as, article access, were vast. What became clear at the forum was that students like to know what they can expect and the ways in which courses may differ from their previous experience. Once enrolled on a course, students also like to have a clear point of contact for guidance, if needed.

Feedback on some of the issues is captured in the following quotation:

*'Perhaps a mentoring system would be helpful because it's been difficult trying to meet other Irish students and/or connect with staff in our departments- some of us have tried to seek out staff members for help getting involved in the department/meeting others/figuring things out. The staff have not been as helpful.'*

*'A bit anti-social, not a discussion based learning approach, doesn't make integration possible.'*

*'Relaxed – not so much stress and meeting students from different nationalities.'*

### **Summary of Student Recommendations:**

- Orientation Programmes need to be extended to include a lot more information on topics such as clubs and societies, healthcare and academic life.
- Pre-departure information packages should be more comprehensive. They should include housing information and a local guide with information about transport, supermarkets, etc.
- Websites should be user-friendly with more information about immigration.
- Teaching staff need to be more approachable, use online course websites more effectively and have extra support tutorials for international students.
- Integration should be promoted in lectures, for example, having more discussion based activities, academic groups.
- Mentoring systems which include staff and students should be established and run throughout the year.

**Appendix 1**

<b>Colleges represented at the Forum (3)</b>	<b>Nationalities of students represented at the Forum (12)</b>
University College Cork	America
Cork English Centre	Australia
Sligo Institute of Technology	Ethiopia
	Finland
	France
	Ireland
	Italy
	Korea
	Malaysia
	Nigeria
	Slovakia
	Uganda