



Introduction:

While the context for the current review is the Government's Action Plan for Jobs 2013, the review of Ireland's International Education Strategy provides the Department and Skills (DES) and other stakeholders with an important opportunity to reflect on the achievements of the strategy to date as well as the challenges that lie ahead if Ireland is to achieve its ambition as "a world leader in high-quality international education".

While ICOS has some general observations to make under the various review headings, most of the organisation's commentary will focus on Section 4 of the review consultation paper, "Strengthening Ireland's reputation for Quality". First, however, we make a few comments on vision, values and targets.

Vision, Values and Targets

The publication in 2010 of "Investing in Global Relationships – Ireland's International Education Strategy 2010-2015" was an important initiative and evidence of the capacity and will of Government agencies and other stakeholders to work together in the national interest to provide a framework – still substantially sound - for the development of international education in Ireland.

This review, however, provides an opportunity for some reframing and rethinking of our national approach to internationalisation. The rationale in the 2010 strategy, "investing in global relationships" is perhaps too narrow and instrumental and there is an over emphasis on quantitative measures such as numbers of mobile students choosing Ireland as a destination. **A more sustainable model of internationalisation will be that build on more modest growth and a vision which has the learning outcomes for all students at its centre, where internationalisation is mainstreamed in the policies of higher education institutions.** Strengthened and outward looking institutions in turn will contribute to national competitiveness and job growth. Important questions need to be asked such as, "Are curriculum designers and the wider academic community aware of the potential power of the international learning experience in enhancing student employability"?¹. Champions of internationalisation in environments where internationalism is at the core of institutional strategy are more likely to succeed and have access to the resources and support that are necessary to deliver on targets as well as to contribute to the quality of the educational experience for all students.

The pursuit of excellence and assurance about the quality of Ireland's educational offering should continue to drive our national strategy but other values articulated in the 2010 strategy need to be re-emphasised and even reframed. As well as placing the learning outcomes of all students at the centre already mentioned, **the new strategy needs to move beyond "a collaborative approach to internationalisation" to one which seeks to achieve policy coherence on internationalisation**

¹Jones Elspeth (2012) : Internationalisation and Employability: Are we missing a trick? In EAIE Forum magazine. Winter 2012 ed

across all Government departments. This policy alignment was not always achieved in the first phase of implementation of the current strategy. Disappointingly after a promising start in 2011 with the introduction of the new immigration regime for non-EEA students and improvements in visa processing, INIS has more recently introduced or is in the processing of introducing measures which seriously impact on international students' experience. These measures were the doubling without notice or discussion of the GNIB registration fee in November 2012 and the proposed centralisation of registration services to Dublin in 2014.

ICOS would like to see more emphasis in the second phase of implementation of the strategy on the quality and sustainability aspects. This hopefully will be largely driven by the introduction of the Quality Mark but other laudable aspirations in the 2010 strategy outline a significant role for the HEA in driving the alignment between institutional internationalisation strategies and national policies and priorities as well as in benchmarking quality and facilitating good practice sharing². Internationalisation as a concept is undergoing constant change and we need to be mindful of the many myths and misconceptions about what it really means in practice. More international students per se does not equate to internationalisation. According to de Wit, "internationalisation is a process to introduce intercultural, international and global dimensions in higher education.....If internationalisation is regarded as a specific goal, then it remains ad hoc and marginal".³

Q1 Creating Irish jobs through sustainable growth in international education

Other agencies rather than ICOS will be in a stronger position to comment on the economic benefits of internationalisation of our education services in terms of revenue generation and job creation. ICOS has, however, previously commented on the importance of, in a labour market context, of the retention of skilled international graduates⁴. **Research⁵ indicates that labour market access is an important factor in informing international student choice.** The research also found that there was room for improvement in the supports offered to international students as the quality of support and the general experience while in education in a country influences students' decision making when considering staying and working in their study destinations. This would suggest that labour market access for current students (20 hours), the Third Level Graduate Scheme and scheme(s) to support entrepreneurial students are worth retaining.

Against a background of more limited international growth in student mobility than had previously been predicted, the national targets in Ireland's 2010 strategy and subsequently amended upwards by the current Government have proven to be overambitious. The capacity or strategic intent of the HEIs to align their own targets with national policy is again very uneven across the sector. A minority of institutions have comprehensive internationalisation strategies while explicit targets regarding growth in international student numbers vary significantly from lows of 5% to highs of over 20%. This would suggest that the link between national strategy and institutional strategy on international education is not as strong as might be expected with obvious implications regarding

² Investing in Global Relationships : Ireland's International Education Strategy 2010-15 (ref 3.5.1 pp-51-2)

³ De Wit Hans: Internationalisation of Higher Education- Nine Misconceptions" in Beelen & de Wit "Internationalisation Revisited: New Dimensions in the Internationalisation of Higher Education" Carem (2012)

⁴ Rumbley Laura E (ed) "Rethinking education Reshaping economies". "International academic talent attraction and retention: The view from Ireland" pgs 31-35 in EAIE 2012 (Dublin conference)

⁵ SVR (2011) Mobile Talent? – The Staying Intentions of International Students in Five EU Countries.....

achievement of national targets. More importantly **from ICOS' perspective, the drive for improvement and investment in the quality of the student experience may be inhibited if internationalisation is not sufficiently embedded in institutional strategies.**

Q2 Competing globally under the Education in Ireland brand

Ireland's value proposition as a centre for international education continues to be well articulated by Enterprise Ireland, sector representatives and institutions themselves. The development of a strong Education in Ireland brand has been a welcome development during the first phase of implementation of the strategy. Institutions themselves will be in a better position to comment on the brand's effectiveness in supporting Ireland's visibility in key markets.

Q3 New opportunities in priority markets

ICOS would like to acknowledge the contribution DES and Irish Aid and indeed HEIs themselves to fellowship and scholarship programmes which support internationalisation and demonstrate strong alignment between Ireland's Foreign Policy and educational objectives. In difficult economic times, it is not easy for HEIs to waive international fees but they have generously done so and Irish Aid has responded by increasing the number of fellowships offered to students from developing countries from 17 in 2012 to 43 in 2013. Ireland's new Policy for International Development, "One World, One Future" released this year also promises that Irish Aid will work closely with HEIs "to promote collaborate partnerships for innovative research and educational activities"(p32). The strategy also promises to substantially expand the fellowship programme in future years.

In the longer term, as their economies grow, it is anticipated that Vietnam and Ireland's African partner countries will be in a position to fund their own students and privately funded students from these countries will also increasingly find their way to Ireland building on the connections and reputation already established.

In general, there have been significant achievements in attracting scholarship students to Ireland, the Brazil without Borders and the King Abdullah scholars from Saudi Arabia being recent examples. These students who otherwise might not get to Ireland to study add to student diversity and not just numbers which is an important component of our strategy. Some caution needs to be exercised, however in terms of level of reliance on students recruited under foreign Government scholarship schemes as these schemes tend by their nature to be short to medium term initiatives to bridge education capacity issues in the home country and "can be discontinued as quickly as started"⁶.

Most internationally mobile students tend to be privately funded. This means that North America and the US in particular will remain a priority market for Ireland for the foreseeable future. There would seem to be insufficient awareness, however, of the diversity as well as the potential in this market. Our regulatory systems would benefit from greater engagement with the interest groups in the US study abroad sector in the next phase of implementation of the strategy so that any factors which inhibit growth and development can be identified and overcome.

⁶ Kemp Neil " Evolution in the markets for international education" pp 13-19 in Rumbley Laura E (ed) "Rethinking education Reshaping economies". EAIE 2012

Q4 Strengthening Ireland's reputation for quality

ICOS welcomes the opportunity provided by DES to facilitate forums where students' views will be heard and taken into account in the current review and we look forward to providing a report on the outcomes of three regional forums to take place in Dublin, Cork and Galway in late October and early November. These forums will build on student feedback already gleaned from previous forums organised jointly by ICOS and USI and already reported on. Forums complement information gathered from student surveys and are very important in determining whether we are meeting student expectations and in identifying areas for improvement in services. ICOS and USI also appreciate DES' support towards the development of a video training resource using the voices of students themselves to raise awareness about their social, cultural and academic needs while in higher education in Ireland. This resource will be available in the near future.

There is much good work going on and much accumulated knowledge and good experience in individual institutions with regard to international student support and the goodwill and hard work of staff in student services has to date ensured that the general experience of international students in Irish HEIs is a positive one (ref International student barometer results). However, **we cannot be complacent and reports, some on record⁷, some anecdotal, of under-resourcing of student services to deal with increasing student numbers leave institutions themselves and Ireland's reputation as a quality destination rather exposed.** National policies such as public sector embargos on recruitment are can be counterproductive and should be capable of flexibility where investment is clearly required to support managed growth. As already mentioned also, those institutions most likely to offer a quality learning experience to all their students are those who already have comprehensive internationalisation strategies with matching resource allocation not just in marketing and recruitment but also in student support services.

Good practice, knowledge and skills can be shared and does happen on a small scale and often informally but would benefit from some national initiatives/incentives to scale up and ensure the benefit is spread more widely and as already mentioned it was anticipated that the HEA could have a role here. Ireland has the potential to learn from experience in other countries in this respect and the new action plan should contain some specific actions to facilitate knowledge and good practice sharing and ICOS and USI and other stakeholders can assist but will need to be supported to do so.

As already mentioned, Ireland so far enjoys a good reputation for the quality of service it provides to international students. However, it can be improved, and a culture of continuous self improvement will, it is hoped, be achieved through the implementation of the International Education Mark (IEM) such that high standards become the norm. The IEM will also be very important in excluding from the sector unscrupulous and poorly managed institutions that exploit students for short term profit and damage Ireland's reputation as a quality education destination.

Any new action plan from the current review could also usefully revisit several other good ideas already outlined in the 2010 strategy which have not been acted on. In terms of transparency, student protection and support of quality, some ideas can be quite easily implemented for

⁷ UCC Institutional Review http://www.iuqb.ie/Reviews/assets/iriu-ucc/TRIU_UCC_Full_Report.pdf

example the inclusion, on the Education in Ireland website of a specific section on quality which links students to relevant documents such as institutional reviews (ref 3.3.2)

It will be important also that student satisfaction surveys are carried out on a regular basis and the results published. The survey coordinated by the IUA in 2012 is a good example and the results provide a benchmark from which to monitor progress as well as supporting marketing efforts.

Summary of recommendations

- The alignment between education and immigration policy has slipped and needs to be brought back on track with better communication and consultation before any immigration measures with significant impact on international students are introduced;
- Overall a greater customer service focus is required in the interaction between non-EEA students and the immigration services. Improvements promised on foot of the doubling of the GNIB registration fee in November 2012 are not yet evident;
- More work needs to be done to ensure institutional internationalisation strategies support the national effort both in terms of quantitative targets and enhancement of the student experience. The HEA has a role in leading this process and some national initiatives/incentives to bring more visibility to this aspect and to scale up would be of benefit⁸;
- There is a link between quality student support, labour market access during study and retention of high skilled graduates to fill critical skill gaps in the Irish economy and current labour market concessions and incentives to support entrepreneurial students to start businesses in Ireland should be retained and enhanced where possible;
- Openness to students' views and genuine feedback will be critical to quality improvement. Regular student satisfaction surveys should be carried out and results published. The student voice on the High Level Group should also be strengthened with a permanent place offered to USI.

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⁸ The student experience component of the Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI) in the UK is instructive in this respect see PMI Student Experience Achievements 2006-2011 UKCISA 2011