



International Student Forums 2018 Report



Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn



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Acknowledgement

The Irish Council for International Students (ICOS) and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) would like to thank all of the students who participated in the 2018 International Student Forums. We would also like to thank each of the institutions who helped promote the forums, as well as our hosts, Trinity College Dublin (TCD), Limerick Institute of Technology (LIT), and the National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG), for providing the use of their facilities. ICOS and USI would like to extend a special thank you to the Department of Education & Skill (DES) for funding support for the forums.



An Roinn Oideachais
agus Scileanna
Department of
Education and Skills

Background & Overview

The International Student Forums provide international students studying at higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland with a genuine opportunity to have their voices heard, while also allowing ICOS and USI to meaningfully engage with international students about the issues most affecting them. ICOS and USI hope that this report from the forums will complement findings from other qualitative and quantitative studies generated at institutional and national level.

In November 2018, ICOS, in conjunction with USI, held a series of International Student Forums in Dublin, Limerick and Galway, aimed at bringing international students together to share their experiences on the core themes of academic and social life at Irish colleges. In total, 54 international students across 10 HEIs participated in the forums.

1. Adapting to Academic Life

A 2018 report, commissioned by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) on the internationalisation of Irish HEIs, found that faculty views on internationalising the curriculum were mixed, with some believing it to be important while others less so. The study also reported that many lecturers did not employ assessment tasks that were culturally sensitive, and that only a few HEIs offered intercultural training for academic staff. ICOS and USI wanted to hear directly from international students

about their experiences of adapting to academic life in Ireland, particularly in relation to how they viewed the delivery of their lectures, the course curriculum and assessment, but also in the wider context of other academic challenges they may be facing.

2. Social Integration in Irish Colleges

Feedback from participants at the 2017 International Student Forum in Dublin indicated that social integration in Irish colleges was an issue which international students were keen to see discussed at future forums. The ambitious targets for international student growth set out in Ireland's International Education Strategy 2016-2020 that 15% of the total student population should be international by 2020 makes it incumbent on HEIs to promote and foster social integration across their campuses. The international student population in Ireland's largest HEIs is already well above 20%.

A 2018 Higher Education Authority (HEA) report on the internationalisation of Irish HEIs found that faculty views on internationalising the curriculum were mixed, with some lecturers believing it to be important while others less so

¹Clarke et al. (2018) 'The Internationalisation of Irish Higher Education'. http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2018/07/report_internationalisation_of_education_2018.pdf

²Department of Education and Skills (2016) 'Irish Educated, Globally Connected: An International Education Strategy for Ireland, 2016-2020'. <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/International-Education-Strategy-For-Ireland-2016-2020.pdf> p33

Summary of Key Findings

- Language and accents, exams and assessment, teaching style and the curriculum were listed as being the biggest academic challenges facing international students;
- Many international students reported that they are unclear on the marking structure and assessment of their course;
- Only a small majority (56%) of participants were aware of the range of student services available in their colleges;
- Social integration of international students remains an ongoing challenge with the majority of participants dissatisfied with their level of interaction with Irish students;
- Language and accents were identified as being barriers to integration
- Participants attending colleges with an international student representative, lacked awareness about their role;
- International students in smaller HEIs tend to feel less well represented than those studying at larger HEIs.

Recommendations

- Faculty should give more consideration to the academic challenges confronting international students, particularly the language difficulties which many non-native English speakers face. Ensuring all academic staff receive adequate Intercultural awareness training could assist academic staff to better understand these challenges;
- Increased efforts need to be made to ensure that international students have a clear picture of the examination, assessment and marking systems in their institutions;

- More intercultural awareness training needs to be provided to Irish students so they can be more culturally sensitive and open to greater engagement with their international student classmates;
- HEIs should continue to focus on the challenge of integration of international students, exploring creative solutions and following best practice, including organising more events that are aimed at both international and local students;
- Student services on campus need to be more visible and promoted on an ongoing basis throughout the academic year;
- HEIs and student unions should ensure that international students are genuinely represented in college structures.

Methodology

- The forums were structured into two one-hour segments: Part 1, focused on adapting to academic life, whilst part 2 focused on social integration;
- Participation was only open to international students attending Irish higher education institutes, representing a departure from previous forums where home students were also invited;
- Where possible, ICOS and USI sought to ensure a balanced representation in terms of gender and nationality at each forum;
- Prior to the forums, ICOS contacted all its members to request details of the student services available on campus. Students were later asked at the forums to name the services available at their institutions as part of Activity 1 in order to see how many knew what was actually available to them;
- Participants at the forums worked in small groups in order to facilitate discussion.

Summary of Forums

| 2018 Student Forums | | | | | |
|---------------------|----------|-------|------------------|----------------------------|----------|
| Date | Location | Venue | No. Participants | No. Countries | No. HEIs |
| 6th Nov 18 | Dublin | TCD | 14 | 10 | 6 |
| 7th Nov 18 | Limerick | LIT | 27 | 9 | 2 |
| 14th Nov 18 | Galway | NUIG | 13 | 10 | 2 |
| | | | 54 | 23 Different nationalities | 10 |

See Appendix 1 for full details of participants

Activity 1 - Adapting to Academic Life

- i. The first part of Activity 1 aimed at identifying the challenges that international students face academically. Participants worked in small groups to come up with what they felt were the main academic challenges for international students. Following these group discussions, one member from each team then explained the challenges their group had identified and ranked them in accordance with the level of difficulty – the highest ranked issue being the most difficult, followed by the second most difficult, third, etc.
- ii. In part two of Activity 1, students were first asked about the support services available to them on campus and to provide details on what they were.
- iii. Participants were then asked to brainstorm strategies to adapt to academic life, with particular attention being placed on the challenges that had been mentioned earlier. They were asked to think of steps that HEIs could take to help international students adapt to academic life, as well as devise practical steps they themselves could take to overcome the challenges that were looked at in the first part of Activity 1.

Once each group had explained the challenges that were identified, the floor was opened up to allow all groups to discuss the points that had been raised by each group and elaborate on further issues.

The ideas outlined in this exercise were then summarised and written on the board.

What are the academic challenges that international students face?

| Academic Challenges | |
|---|---|
| <p>Main challenges</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Language and accent problems 2. Exams and assessment 3. Teaching Styles 4. The curriculum | <p>Other examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of clear guidance from lecturers • Difficulty communicating with faculty • Class sizes • Lack of organisation • No fixed clear timetable • Punctuality • Workload • Cultural differences in group work • Getting used to academic system • Lack of student tutors • Loneliness when it comes to study – trying to figure things out |

Language Problems

Participants from all 3 forums highlighted language and accents as being a big challenge, even for native speakers, but especially for those for whom English was not their first language. Many participants found that their lecturers spoke too fast and often with strong accents. Some of the non-native English participants voiced their frustrations at not being understood by their Irish lecturers and classmates.

“I can’t understand them and they can’t understand me. A huge vocabulary of complex words is used and I have no familiarity with them.”

Exams and Assessment

Numerous participants at each forum reported struggling to understand their course grading and assessment system. Some participants felt that there was a lack of clear guidance on assessment which ultimately had a negative impact on their grades. A minority of students attributed this to a “relaxed” attitude held by academic and administrative staff at their colleges.

At the Limerick forum, group work and group activities were also highlighted as being challenging, most notably for undergraduates, who found that international students always ended up having to work together. One student also commented that there was too much emphasis placed on group work for assessment purposes.

Teaching Styles

Although participants generally agreed that their lecturers were friendly and approachable, there were a few participants who felt otherwise. Many students at the forums felt that the teaching styles employed by their lecturers were very different to the ones they were used to, particularly the concept of independent learning. Some students reported that their lecturers’ expectations and instructions were unclear. One student at the Dublin forum spoke about how her lecturers did not focus enough on exam preparation. A number of students at the forums felt that lecturers should be more supportive to international students as unfamiliar teaching methods can be confusing, especially at the beginning.

The Curriculum

Satisfaction with the curriculum varied, although generally participants reported being happy about their course content. Students agreed resoundingly that their course curricula should be globally focused; however, there were mixed views over how well this was being achieved. Erasmus and exchange programme students in Limerick found their curricula was very internationally focused, and this was echoed in Galway. A minority of participants in Dublin and Limerick complained that their classes were too focused on Ireland.

Other

Many students at the Dublin forum reported non-academic factors as hindering their study time, namely the difficulties surrounding accommodation and getting an immigration appointment. Considering all the stresses that international students are faced with, particularly those who have just arrived to Ireland, it was felt that these problems were extremely stressful and ones which they had not really factored in prior to coming to Ireland. It was noted by some students that there was at times a “laid back attitude” from the staff at their institution and that departments were often too predisposed to sending international students from one department to another rather than dealing with student issues themselves. Post-graduate students reported that they did not get sufficient one-to-one time with their lecturers.

“The teaching style here is very different in the sense that the lecturer here relates the things we study to real life situation instead of gearing towards examination.”

“The information we get as international students is a lot. I had a visa delay and missed orientation. It threw me completely. Workshops for study support were advised at orientation but I didn’t know – and then there was nothing again until the next semester. They should be more regular.”

Do you feel that you have adequate academic support on campus?

- Only 56% of participants were aware of the range of academic services available at their college.
- 43% of participants reported accessing student support services on campus, with those having availed of services generally expressing satisfaction with the assistance they received.
- All of the postgraduate students at the Galway forum reported using academic services.



What more could your college do to improve your academic experience?

| Academic Improvements (HEIs) | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide more training for tutors • More support with immigration • More information on assessment • Have more international staff in the international office • Hire teaching assistants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More structured timetable • Facilitate more integration in classes • More contact time with lecturers • Provide clearer information about college structures • Advertise the services available to international students more |

While participants appreciated the workshops and events organised during orientation week at the start of term, they believed that many of these activities should be organised throughout the year as it can be difficult for international students to get to grips with so much information in such a short space of time. One person at the Galway forum felt that international student orientation sessions can be too generic and more tailoring to subject areas and courses would be beneficial.

There was a strong consensus amongst participants of the forums, mainly undergraduates, that group work needed to be facilitated more to allow for greater inclusion of international students. Many found that there was too much of a tendency for international students to work together, which was often as a result of Irish students failing to incorporate them in their groups.

Participants felt that more clarity on grading and marking systems should be provided by their lecturers, and the college as a whole, as international students often fall down over this.

A number of postgraduate students at the forums commented on the difficulties of meeting their lecturers and that more face time with them would be beneficial.

In 2 of the 3 forums, the majority of students believed that the student support services needed to be advertised better.

Dublin-based students believed that the international offices should be doing more to assist students in registering with immigration.

It was felt throughout the forums that there needed to be better communication between the different college departments.

At all 3 forums, many participants commented that timetabling could be improved.

Many postgraduate participants felt that more teaching assistants, tutors and mentors should be provided to international students for additional support.

Additional international staff to work in the international office was also suggested at the Galway forum.

What steps can students take to help adapt to academic life in Ireland?

Participants were encouraged to think of steps that they themselves could take in order to adapt academically and improve their overall experience. The main points are summarised in the table below.

| Student Solutions | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek help from lecturers and peers • Avail of academic services • Take steps to improve English skills – attend classes, socialise more • Be more disciplined • Audio record lectures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Network • Ask other international students for help • Try to integrate more with Irish students • Look for tutors • Create study groups |

Activity 2 - Social Integration in Irish Colleges

As an introduction to Activity 2, students watched a short video segment from ICOS' Intercultural Awareness Training manual, Diverse Voices, featuring international students speaking about their experiences of interacting with Irish students.

i. Participants were given a set of questions (see Appendix 2) to discuss the issues raised in the video and to prompt discussion on their own experiences of interacting with local students on campus and the barriers they may have faced.

At the end of the activity, groups were asked to provide feedback in relation to the barriers to social integration and the facilitator noted them on the board. Similar to the first exercise, the floor was opened up to allow for further discussion to develop the points raised.

ii. Students were given an additional set of questions aimed at addressing the challenges that had been raised in the first part of the exercise (see Appendix 2).

iii. Participants were also asked about how well represented they felt at their college.

Summary of Key Findings

What are the social barriers that international students face at Irish colleges?

Across the 3 forums, it was felt that Irish students were generally reluctant to socialise with international students and made little effort to get to know them. There were many reasons suggested for this, the main ones are outlined in the table below.

| Academic Improvements (HEIs) | |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irish people stick to cliques • Alcohol • Cultural differences • Religion • Accommodation & transport | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • International student only focused events • Different sense of humour • Language and accents |

When asked their views on being friends and “hanging out” with their Irish classmates, participants at the forums gave a variety of perspectives. The overall feeling was that Irish students were very “cliquish” and not interested in making friends with international students. Class group work very often revolved around established friendships, leaving some international students feeling left out.

“Irish students are well nested and engaged by the time they get to the universities, they have the friends and support, but it’s really hard to get into their network.”

“I have made efforts to make friends with Irish students, on my own. As long as I make the first move, I find they are really nice to talk to but I have never been approached first.”

“I feel like I have adapted quite well to the culture as well as the slang in Ireland.”

“Not really, despite people being friendly and nice, they still lack the ability to understand the fact that we are new and we are foreigner so we don’t know the way society is working in Ireland, so they need to allow us to adapt and help us to adapt instead of making fun of it, after all we’re not born here so we don’t know certain things.”

“Most of my classmates are friendly but it’s hard for me to get a really close relationship with them.”



A small number of participants expressed their disappointment about the lack of contact they had with Irish students. Despite this, some participants did report having made Irish friends and felt they had integrated well with Irish students in their class.

Other students found that cultural differences made social integration more difficult for them; these students referenced alcohol as being one of the main attributing factors for this. In all 3 forums, there was a strong belief that Irish students drank too much. Some participants reported that there were not many events for international students at their colleges and the few that were held involved alcohol. For those that did like to socialise, they were surprised by how often Irish students went out during the week.

Many participants found the Irish sense of humour to be difficult to understand. Three students at the Galway forum and one student at the Limerick forum reported experiencing racist remarks which were passed off as jokes.

Accommodation and transport logistics were seen as barriers to integration by those not living in accommodation close to college as they could not socialise with their classmates due to living far away and having poor access to transport. On the other hand, it was observed that Irish students living at home often did not spend much time in college and there was little opportunity to get to know them.

One student at the Dublin forum raised the issue that her college only organised international student events which lead to segregation of international students and Irish students, this was also echoed at the other forums. While these kinds of events are appreciated, they can unintentionally lead to segregation. Language and accents were mentioned as an academic challenge in Activity 1, and were also identified as a social barrier in Activity 2.

Recommendations

What steps can international students take themselves to integrate on campus?

Student Solutions

- Join clubs and societies
- Volunteer
- Go to the pub
- Try to hang out less with people from your own country
- Get involved with SU

Joining clubs and societies was identified as the first steps that international students could take to widen their circle of friends; indeed, some participants at the forums reported being active in groups and societies at their college.

It was suggested at the Galway forum that volunteering was a great way of getting involved in the community and also meeting new people.

While it was generally felt that Irish students could be very cliquish, participants at the forum recognised that international students could also find themselves socialising in the same circles, including sticking with people from their own nationality. Given that integration is a two-way process, participants at the 3 forums agreed that international students should try to be more proactive in their efforts to engage with local students.

One participant at the Dublin forum recounted how he had been involved in establishing a 'Multicultural Society' at his college, bringing together international and Irish students in a way that sought to recognise the events of different cultures while bringing Irish students in. Similar ideas were discussed at the other forums. The majority of students believed that more needs to be done on both sides to improve social integration amongst home and international students.

A number of students expressed enthusiasm at the idea of more involvement from international students in the student unions.

Recommendations

What can your college / Irish students do to facilitate better social integration?

Social Integration Improvements (HEIs & Irish Students)

- Class ice breakers
- More events for local and international students
- Set up buddy programmes
- Cultural awareness training for Irish students
- More international student representation on campus
- More engagement from the student union
- More international staff

In classes, lecturers could do more to structure group work in ways that ensure Irish and international students are more mixed, this could be potentially beneficial in both a social and academic sense. Likewise, lecturers could try to facilitate more interaction through icebreakers, particularly at the beginning.

It was suggested that colleges could offer more combined social events and perhaps do more to build up the empathy of Irish students through awareness-raising.

Buddy programmes existed in some colleges, but not in others. Participants viewed this as a good opportunity to meet Irish students.

One person at the Dublin forum commented that the structure of societies and groups was not very clearly explained at their college.

More opportunities for international students to participate in college affairs.

Do you believe that international students are well represented at your college?

There were mixed views with regard to how well participants at the forums felt international students were represented at their colleges; however, the majority felt that they were not well represented. It was noted that some colleges had a designated International Student Officer, including two present at the Dublin and Galway forums, which was seen as resoundingly positive. Despite this, most of the participants attending colleges with an International Student Officer were either unaware of their role, or completely unaware of the existence of this role.

In general, international student representation across Irish student unions was in the minority, with the majority of international students having no representative at their institution. Participants at the Limerick forum expressed particular interest in having more student representation.



Appendix 1 - Participant Profile

| Dublin Forum | | |
|------------------|----|--|
| Age | | Country of Origin |
| 18-24 | 10 | Australia India (4) Ukraine China (2) Malaysia Zimbabwe Finland Turkey Israel The Netherlands |
| 25-29 | 3 | |
| 30-34 | 0 | |
| N/A | 1 | |
| Gender | | Institutions Represented |
| Male | 5 | Dublin City University Griffith College Dublin Royal College of Surgeons Ireland Trinity College Dublin TU Dublin University College Dublin |
| Female | 9 | |
| Level of Studies | | |
| PhD | 1 | |
| Masters | 4 | |
| Undergrad | 9 | |

| Limerick Forum | | |
|------------------|----|--|
| Age | | Country of Origin |
| 18-24 | 18 | Canada (4) India (3) Palestine China (2) Kenya France (5) Malaysia (5) Germany Nigeria (5) |
| 25-29 | 5 | |
| 30-34 | 1 | |
| N/A | 3 | |
| Gender | | Institutions Represented |
| Male | 12 | Limerick Institute of Technology University of Limerick |
| Female | 15 | |
| Level of Studies | | |
| PhD | 0 | |
| Masters | 9 | |
| Undergrad | 15 | |
| N/A | 3 | |

Appendix 1 - Participant Profile (cont'd)

| Galway Forum | | |
|------------------|---|--|
| Age | | Country of Origin |
| 18-24 | 5 | Brazil (2) Iran Pakistan |
| 25-29 | 5 | Canada Jordan USA India Malaysia (2) |
| 30-34 | 3 | Indonesia Nigeria |
| Gender | | Institutions Represented |
| Male | 7 | National College of Ireland Galway |
| Female | 6 | Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology |
| Level of Studies | | |
| PhD | 4 | |
| Masters | 5 | |
| Undergrad | 4 | |

Appendix 2 - Activity Questions

Activity 2 - Barriers to Social Integration

- Discuss the issues raised in the video, can you identify with any of the problems facing the students?
- Do you “hang out” with Irish students from your class?
- Do you think that Irish students make an effort to socialise with international students? Why or why not?
- In your groups, brainstorm and list the barriers to social integration in Irish colleges.

Activity 2 - Overcoming Barriers to Social Integration

- What steps can international students take themselves to integrate on campus?
- As integration is a two way process, what do you think Irish students could do to facilitate better integration on campus?
- How does your college facilitate integration on campus? What extra supports could be put in place?
- In your group, brainstorm ways, or strategies, that you feel could help improve social integration in your college. These can be initiatives taken by students, the college or someone else.

Participants' Comments

- “Exams and the curriculum is a massive issue and teaching style is the cause of it, I wish it can be more organised and delivered in a better way.”
- “The information we get as international students is a lot. I had a visa delay and missed orientation. It threw me completely. Workshops for study support were advised at orientation but I didn't know – and then there was nothing again until the next semester. They should be more regular.”
- Knowing your workload is hard to judge when things are unorganised and left free or “less structured; it makes for an interesting education, but it's hard when you're not familiar with this style.”
- “The college should have a better way of getting in touch and checking on the international students and making sure they are well tuned into the course. Also considering that when we're away from our home and friends so we lack of support that we need.”
- “More effort should be put into the orientation of the international students as concerning their integration into their individual course of study and the academic expectations of the lecturers considering what they studied in their undergraduate programme.”
- “More integration of International students with Irish students. More group mixes - sometimes, groups end up being only one nationality. Which doesn't help with the international experience. More feedback - feedback in my previous programme was mostly inadequate although one or two lecturers gave great and detailed feedback.”
- “Despite [Irish] people being friendly and nice, they still lack the ability to understand the fact that we are new and we are foreigner so we don't know the way society works in Ireland, so they need to allow us to adapt and help us to adapt instead of making fun of it, after all we're not born here so we don't know certain things.”
- “International students and their issues are not represented the way they should be represented. When were away from home and away from friends and family we do lack of support and do need the care and make us feel at least a bit more represented.”



Union of Students in Ireland
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