



## ICOS COVID-19 International Student Survey

### Background

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland has greatly affected thousands of people across the country, including international students. Since the government order to close all educational institutions on 13 March, ICOS has been trying to provide support, guidance, and information to international students studying at English language schools, colleges and universities. The COVID-19 International Student Survey was carried out by ICOS to engage with international students as best as possible at this time, to capture student feedback, and better understand the issues facing international students as a result of COVID-19.

### Methodology

An online survey was created in 3 languages (English, Spanish, and Portuguese) and ran from 17 April until 26 April. ICOS publicised and shared the survey across social media, with higher education institutes, and relevant organisations and community groups that work with international students.<sup>1</sup> The survey was designed to allow responses from English language students and international students studying at higher education institutes, that is, third level students, to be recorded separately. Participants' responses were anonymised with the exception of limited personal details such as country of origin, length of time in Ireland, type of visa etc.

The survey consisted of 29 questions relating to the length of time students had been living in Ireland, their immigration status, the response of their school / college / university to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as students' financial circumstance, well-being, work and accommodation.

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<sup>1</sup> In this summary, the term 'international students' is used to refer to English language students and third level students as a collective cohort.

## Summary of key findings:

- 47% of English language students who reported working part-time were able to access the Pandemic Employment Fund, 8% reported having lost their job, but do not qualify for the fund, while 17% continue to work as normal;
- 49% of third level students who reported working part-time were able to access the Pandemic Employment Fund, 21% reported having lost their job, but do not qualify for the fund, while 19% continue to work as normal;
- 250 English language students and 25 third level students responded saying they were looking for work but did not have a PPS number;
- Only 13% of English language students were satisfied with the online classes they are being provided by their school owing to a range of problems, including: poor internet connectivity, online classes consisting of 70 people, shorter classes, less frequent classes, poorly planned lessons, lack of interactivity, and students not being in the incorrect level;
- 606 of English language student respondents (54%) had commenced their English language course between January – April;
- 67% of international students are concerned they will be unable to pay their rent;
- 46% of English language students share a room with 3 or more people, of which 11% share a room with 6 or more people. Less than 13% of English language students have their own room, and many expressed their concerns about their accommodation and their ability to self-isolation. One English language respondent stated that 5 people in her house had contracted COVID-19.

### 1. Breakdown of Survey Participants

In total, 1626 international students took part in the survey, of which 1114 (70%) indicated that they were studying at an English language school, 484 (30%) indicated that they were studying at a college or university, while 28 (2%) did not say. 40% of surveys were completed in English, 29% in Spanish, and 31% in Portuguese.

The table below displays the countries with the highest participation in the survey. In overall terms, the country with the largest cohort of participants was Brazil with 594 (37%), followed by Mexico and Chile.

Nationalities	
Brazil	594
Mexico	160
Chile	108
India	71
South Korea	53
Argentina	51
Malaysia	42
Bolivia	36
Honduras	31
Nigeria	26

420 (35%) of respondents reported having arrived to Ireland within the last 3 months, 137 (27%) within the last 6 months, with the rest living in Ireland 1 year or more.

89% of survey respondents reported that they were still in Ireland. Of the 151 respondents who indicated that they were not in Ireland, 122 (81%) were studying at higher education institutes, 37 of whom were from visa required countries.

## 2. Immigration

Unsurprisingly most students indicated that they were on a Student Visa (77%), 7% of respondents said they were on a Tourist Visa, while a small number of students reported being undocumented.<sup>2</sup> The rest of the respondents were made up of EU citizens and graduates on the Third Level Graduate Scheme Visa.

Participants were asked about their satisfaction with the level of communication received from immigration in relation to COVID-19; 41% indicated they were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied', while 21% were either 'very dissatisfied' or 'dissatisfied' with the communication from immigration.

## 3. English Language Students

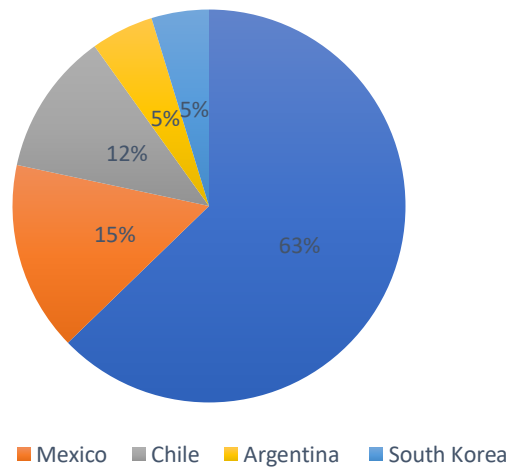
Participants from Brazil (531), Mexico (142) and Chile (107) accounted for 78% of the responses for English language students.

606 respondents (54%) reported that they had commenced their English language course between January – April. 378 respondents reported that they had started a new English course in January or February, of which 147 (38%) had arrived to Ireland for the first time. There were 191 respondents who indicated that they had commenced studies in 2019.

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<sup>2</sup> Some recently arrived students reported that they were undocumented. For the purpose of this analysis, these students were marked as being on a Tourist Visa.

## Survey Participants - English Language Schools



### Communication

40% of English language students were satisfied with the communication they received from their school in relation to COVID-19, 28% were not, and 32% were either unsure or said they were indifferent about this.

Students were also asked if their school had offered a refund or discussed how classes would be delivered when the pandemic ends. 62% of participants said that their school had not discussed either possibility.

#### **Survey feedback about communication from school:**

[Brazilian student] "Yes, they gave me 2 options, either have classes online or wait for the pandemic to pass"

[Honduran student] "My school didn't offer any money back. They said the class will happen online until that situation back to normal. After that we will continuous until each student finish the course. They also said we won't have any extra class for that"

[Brazilian student] "Offered discount just to renovation, but I don't will do my renovation in the same school. And I didn't pay for online classes, I paid for presential classes"

[Swiss student] No, I had to get to all information by myself. No I get might a little amount of money back. But only a little part of the big amount. And either I have always to search for my information. There is no clear communication about the circumstance.

[Korean student]"There were 2 options, go to South Korea and come back, or we give you a discount when you extend your class"

[Mexican Student] “My school declared itself bankrupt and I haven’t received anything”

### Online Classes

Respondents were asked whether their school was offering classes online, with 90% of those who responded to the question reporting that they were receiving online tuition. Many students acknowledged the current extraordinary circumstances due to the pandemic were outside of theirs and the schools’ control. Despite this, there was a general sense of grievance at having to attend online classes having paid for face-to-face instruction.

Is your school providing classes online?	
Yes	883
No	95
Total	978

A small minority of students were happy with the online classes that were being provided by their school; however, the vast majority were not. Asked how satisfied they were with their online classes, only 13% of survey participants indicated that they were ‘satisfied’ or ‘very satisfied’, while 61% said that they were either ‘dissatisfied’ or ‘very dissatisfied’.

The high level of dissatisfaction could be attributed to external factors unrelated to the online classes themselves. Poor internet connectivity, not having a suitable device to attend the online classes, and living in overcrowded cramped conditions were among the main issues that were highlighted in the survey.

Yet there were a lot of negative comments expressed over the quality of classes being offered as an alternative to face-to-face lessons, including: online classes with up to 70 people participating, shorter classes, less frequent classes, poorly planned lessons, lack of interactivity, and students not being in the incorrect level.

Some students who were not offered online classes were advised to return to their home countries and come back in September 2020 or in January 2021. Others were simply told there were no online classes and that no further classes would be provided to make up for those missed because of COVID-19.

### **Survey feedback about online classes provided by English language schools:**

[Honduran student] “It doesn’t work right, there is 70 people in the same class, you can’t learn anything, it’s a mess”

[Brazilian student] "I understand that we are facing difficult times, and I know that online classes are the only way to study this moment, but unfortunately I can't have these classes. I've informed my school several times that I don't have a computer/laptop here, and my cell phone is not good enough to use the apps necessary to the classes. I also don't have a book since I started to study two weeks before the lockdown, and I moved up to another level a day before the school closed. I live in a house with 11 people and it's impossible to have classes like this. It's really upsetting, because I paid a lot of money to have a face to face class, and the course is really important to me. Nowadays I'm studying by myself"

[Brazilian student] "They put me in an intermediate class when I am elementary"

[Brazilian student] "They are given a poor material, pre-recorded videos on Facebook (available for everyone that have a Facebook account) and live tutorials just available between 2-3pm, so the morning students that still working aren't able to attend it. The classes aren't divided by levels (they combined 10 levels in 3)"

[Chilean student] "We know the situation; online classes are the only option. However, it would be great if the classes were more interactive, the current system is like just watching a video"

[Argentinean student] "It's difficult to be in front of a screen for so long, and my wifi connection is poor, but overall I'm satisfied with the online classes"

[Brazilian student] "I would like some government institution helped the students with the negotiations with the school because more than 80 students signed online a letter that was sent to school asking to have a online meeting to discuss a situation and to find a solution good solution for both parties but school seems to not taking it in consideration"

[Mexican student] " I do feel schools should refund the period we are not attending to classes in person. Online classes do not meet the quality standards I was looking for"

[Mexican student] "I just would like to add that we, as students, would really appreciate the support of ICOS in regard to English schools. I understand that the situation we all have been through has been difficult, but it is not fair that English schools are not supporting students and all they think is about not losing their money. We paid for face-to-face classes. We either worked more than the usual, saved a lot of money or even asked for a loan to be able to pay for an English course and what we deserve is to get what we paid for"

[South Korean student] "My school didn't give me satisfied. They provide online classes, but it is just 3 classes for all of students. It's too run short. May be, It will recognize attendance of this classes to all of students. If it does that, my money will just disappear. What can I do?"

[Chilean student] "My school told me that they open school in September, and they give me 3 option. 1.- go home and come back later in anytime 2.- like a second option they

offer me online class, but this is not the point I don't pay for a online class for that I pay a course in Chile and cheaper than in Ireland. 3- I can wait to September

### Well-being

In these times of uncertainty, and given the precarious situation of many students, more than a quarter of English language students reported that their general well-being as negative, with 27% saying they felt 'bad' or 'very bad'. Out of 976 responses, 391 (40%) reported their general well-being as ranging between 'good', 'very good' and 'excellent'.

#### **Survey feedback from English students on their well-being:**

"I am very worried about the uncertainty"

[Honduran student] "I am worried because I can't work or apply for the state benefit, and in addition the lack of classes mean that I am unable to get over the language barrier"

[Brazilian student] "I want to return home as soon as possible, but I can't"

[South Korean student] "As soon as I got all the paperwork ready to work, I got a lockdown, so I couldn't work or get unemployment benefits. As things stand now, I have to go back to South Korea. I am very depressed and anxious now"

[Bolivian student] "I'm trying to save in case something happens, my rent never goes down, so the only way to save is by buying cheaper food, and now I feel tired and sick all the time. I can't go home because the school won't tell me if they'll return my money or not, and in any case the borders are closed"

### Finance

According to the survey, 47% of English language students who reported working part-time were able to access the Pandemic Employment Fund, 8% reported having lost their job, but do not qualify for the fund, while 17% continue to work as normal. Worryingly, however, almost 250 students responded saying they were looking for work but did not have a PPS number. The majority of these students arrived to Ireland over the last number of months, but due to the current situation, many have being left unable to register with immigration, apply for work, or attend their classes.

**Survey feedback about financial situation of English language students:**

[Brazilian student] "I hope that the government look the recently arrived students, that we are in a critical situation to remain here without the right to benefit"

[Brazilian student] "I want to thank the Irish government for the financial support that they have been given"

[Brazilian student] "What we want is just the regularization of documents. There is no standardization in the PPSN process and no guidance, some people are successful with some criteria and others are denied, respecting the same criteria. We are unable to apply to the few job vacancies that arise because they only hire those who have PPSN and, at the same time, are only giving PPSN to those who are working"

[Mexican student] "Please support the students and Help us get our money back. The government has not helped us at all because we haven't paid taxes, but we paid money to Irish schools to come here in order to study. We should have some right to support after paying almost 4,000e"

[Salvadorian student] I hope someone can help us, even if with just food or rent"

[Russian student] I am grateful to the Irish Government for supporting foreign students at such a difficult time"

[Chilean student] "I used to work as a cleaner in private houses and also as a childminder, in neither of them I paid taxes so I don't qualify for the unemployment benefits, is there any I could do?"

[Argentinean student] "I have applied for a PPS number twice, and no one has even responded"

Accommodation

46% of English language students said that they shared a room with 3 or more people. 11% share a room with 6 or more people. Less than 10% said that they had their own room, and many students expressed their concerns about their accommodation and their ability to self-isolation. 19% of English language students share a bathroom with more than 6 people. One respondent stated that 5 people in her house had contracted COVID-19.

**Survey feedback from English language students about their accommodation situation:**

"We are 6 people living together that try to support one another, but it's difficult when none of us are working"



I'm still paying the same rent without any consideration from the landlord or government

"We are 13 people living in a 4 bed house"

"We live in house seven people but we have one bathroom"

"They want to kick us out of the house, but we are all new to Ireland, and we have no jobs, and are running low on money"

"There are 16 people in the house, and 5 have the virus"

"The house has 4 bedrooms, but there are 11 of us staying here, and we all pay 500e each"

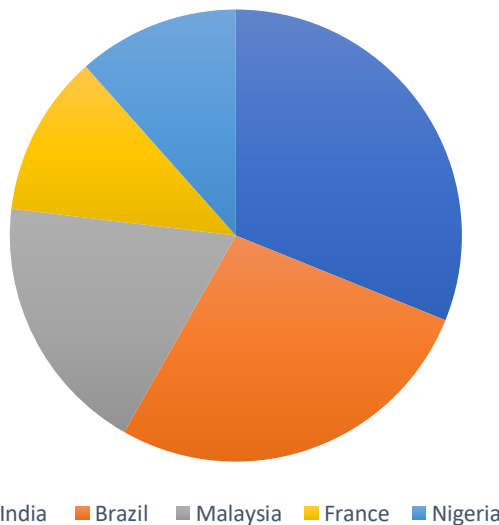
"the government must create laws that regulate the sub-renting service so that there is price control"

"Sometimes we don't know how to manage with our landlord because we don't have a contract so they hesitate us a deposit and sometimes you don't know if they will return it"

#### **4. Higher Education Institutes**

International students studying at Irish higher education institutes represented 1 third of the responses collected in this survey with 484. Out of the respondents who indicated their country of origin, Indian nationals representing the largest cohort (21%), followed by Brazilian (19%), and Malaysian (13%).

## Survey Participants - Higher Education Institutes



### Communication

Respondents reported that they were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the level of communication they had received from their higher education institute in relation to COVID-19 (70%). Only 12% felt 'dissatisfied or 'very dissatisfied' with the communication from their institute.

Generally, third level students were also happy about the support they had received from their college, with 61% indicating that they were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied', while 21% saying they were 'neither satisfied nor dissatisfied'. However, there were more negative than positive comments given from the 18% of third level students who were unhappy about their institutes' communication.

#### **Survey feedback about communication from higher education institutes:**

[Canadian student] "They communicated regularly and try to alleviate any concerns"

[Spanish student] "I didn't have any news or recommendations from my university regarding this issue except that we follow the recommendations of our destiny university. Nothing about if we should come back or not"

[Thai student] "Very few communications from college about the assessment for each module"

[Brazilian student] "The school has done an excellent job. But overall, I can't seem to be calm about what's going on. I don't know how long I'll be able to keep up. I needed to get a job that could help me. But with the pandemic it is very difficult"

[US student] “My individual department has been extremely supportive, the college as a whole I feel has not been very supportive”

### Online classes

Similarly, to English students, third level students were asked whether their college or university was offering classes online, with 91% of those who responded reporting that they were receiving online tuition.

Is your college providing classes online?	
Yes	377
No	38
Total	415

There was understandably a much higher degree of satisfaction with the online classes being provided by higher education institutes. Out of 351 responses, more than half were positive about their classes. Despite this, 24% were unhappy with the online classes provided, and quality and support seemed to vary across institute. 25% responded indicated they were ‘neither satisfied nor dissatisfied’ with their online classes.

### **Survey feedback about online classes provided by higher education institutes:**

[Brazilian student] “I feel that is way harder to absorb the content now. Their performance also decreased considerably”

[Venezuelan student] “Everything is a copy paste of the PHS online page...but our concern is about next semester, this online course is a bit stressful”

[Spanish student] “The lecturers haven’t given classes online, they send us material without any explanation”

[Indian student] “I don't understand If I had to take modules online then why I spend so much of my money to come here”

### Well-being

57% of third level students studying reported that they were feeling good, which is a more positive response rate than that for English language students. Yet there were still a high number of respondents (29%) who said they were ‘good sometimes, but more often bad’.

There were also 14% of respondents who said they were feeling 'bad' or 'very bad', which is reflected in the comments.

**Survey feedback from third level students on their well-being:**

[Indian student] "I'm highly anxious of my student permit expiring in July with the GNIB office closed, and no updates have been shared pertinent to visa renewal appointments. I live on campus and we've been asked to vacate premises on June 6th though there is a ban on eviction as per the emergency legislation. Having invested close to 20,000EU for my education, the overall lack of support and communication is daunting"

[French student] "Good in the overall, however I feel anxious more often"

[Venezuelan student] "Emotional and mental I'm no well, this COVID keeps everything out of place, and now with no job, no future.... no passport, no visa. It's too much"

[Malaysian student] "Half of my brainpower is used to worry about my personal welfare, whether to go home or not and the uncertainties awaiting us. For example, job prospects, financial hardships etc"

[Nigerian student] "I miss physical classes, going out to the city centre and also meeting friends, the African market/shop is as well closed. Asides all these, I am good"

Finance

49% of third level students who reported working part-time were able to access the Pandemic Employment Fund, 21% reported having lost their job, but do not qualify for the fund, which is significantly higher than the number of English language students refused the payment, while 19% continue to work as normal. 37% of students reported that they do not work.

Third level students were also asked a question on how they funded their studies. 59% said that they funded studies through self-study, 18% through a scholarship, and for 24% it was unclear as they selected 'other'.

**Survey feedback about financial situation of third level students:**

[Nigerian student] "I am having concern about my rent as my plan was to get a part-time job, in other to support myself in paying my rent, but sadly I couldn't . I am worried about how I will pay my next rent, if I don't get support or job as soon as possible"

[Malaysian Student] "It is really tricky for international students. We are unsure about returning home due to the risk, not only to ourselves but also we have our family to mind"

about; though in some countries governments provide a self-quarantine stay for those who returned home. At the same time, we know that staying here for long would not be a rational choice, as careers prospects pose a lot of uncertainties. This is especially tough for those who are not eligible to any social welfare payment like myself. I was planning to look for a job during the summer but the chances are low now”

[Brazilian student] “My financial situation is very complicated, I cannot apply for a job now during the pandemic because I have immunity problems and I am in the risk group, probably in 1 month I will not have enough money to stay here and the school does not consider returning me the money paid, so I feel pretty lost”

[Pakistani student] “I would like to share my opinion that government should support those, who were financially relied by their guardians. Even, it can be a short-term loan in order to survive during this disaster”.

### Accommodation

Over half of third level students who responded to the accommodation questions reported having their own room, compared to just 10% of English language students. Only a small number of third level students were sharing a room with more than 1 person. 17 respondents said they were sharing a bathroom with more than 6 people. 52% of students expressed concern over their ability to pay their rent.

#### **Survey feedback from third level students about their accommodation situation:**

“To avoid the virus, I still live in same place, but I move to a room outside alone for a short term”

“Roommates have left for another county”

“I live with a family with three kids”

“I used to share but my roommate went back to France”

“Can the minister of housing department make some benefits for students who are unemployed? It’s very difficult to survive with day to day expenses and rent is really a big pressure. I am not eligible for covid unemployment benefits and also cannot work to support myself or can't depend on someone else during this crisis”

## 5. Additional comments from International students

[Nepali student] “I believe that helping international student like us will not only go a long way in preserving the reputation as top international education provider but rather improve students interested in studying in Ireland that look after all students well”

[Brazilian student] “Of course we arrive to Ireland with €3000, but the agencies advise us to bring more because Ireland is expensive. Unfortunately, not everyone has the ability to bring more than the required amount for the visa. It’s impossible to live for 8 months in Ireland without a job”

[Indian student] “The government in Ireland is doing a great job to fight against the COVID-19”

[Indian student] “The Graduate Visa needs to be extended for another year; I haven’t found a job yet”

[Mexican student] “I think they should extend our visas as we are not getting the experience we paid for”

[Honduran student] “There are no embassies from Central America here”

## Conclusion

These are challenging times for international students, as they are for everyone else. The survey serves to highlight some of the main difficulties facing international students as a whole, but also some of the more individual challenges that are more prevalent to either English language students or third level students. There remain serious concerns over the quality of classes being currently provided, this seems particularly evident in the case of English language students.

Many international students have been able to access the Pandemic Employment Fund, but there is also a significant number that have not. In many cases, recently arrived students find themselves in the most precarious position due to not being able to work, not being able to access the emergency funding. They are also arriving to an unfamiliar country and at times with limited English. These students would have come to Ireland with a realistic expectation of getting work relatively easily, but due to COVID-19 this has not been possible, and many are facing financial hardship.

### Recommendations:

1. Provide clear information and easy access for international students to obtain a PPS number;
2. Allow international students who have arrived to Ireland the possibility to apply for an Exceptional Need Payment;
3. Provide information on tenant rights in multiple languages and investigate landlords who are exploiting international students;
4. Establish minimum standards in English language instruction online and assist language schools that require help to achieve this;
5. Provide visa extension to all international students and graduates on a Stamp 1G that have been negatively affected by COVID-19.

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