







HERE TO BE LONG

International Student Belonging and Participation in Ireland

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ICOS

Here to Belong

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Foreword

When we gathered in Galway for ICOS' *Here to Belong* seminar in June 2026, we wanted to create an opportunity to reflect on what it means for international students to feel welcome, included and able to participate fully in life in Ireland.

The experiences shared by our student panellists, and the conversations that followed around the tables, reminded us that the experience of studying in Ireland extends well beyond the classroom. International students are part of our institutions, workplaces and communities, yet their opportunities to connect, participate and feel that they belong can vary considerably.

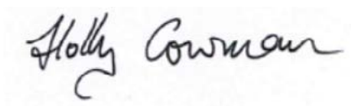
One of the central messages I took from the day was that a sense of belonging cannot simply be assumed or provided by an institution. It is something students experience and define for themselves. It is shaped by relationships and everyday encounters, but also by the policies, practices and wider conditions that influence their lives. Therefore, creating a sense of belonging should not be understood as asking international students to do more to fit in. It requires us to consider the responsibilities of institutions, policymakers and wider society in creating environments where students are respected, supported and able to contribute on their own terms.

The discussions in Galway demonstrated the value of bringing students together with those working across international education, public policy and civil society. They also highlighted that while there is much good work already taking place, meaningful progress requires continued attention, genuine collaboration and a willingness to listen.

As this seminar was my final event as Chair of ICOS, it was an appropriate occasion to reflect on the organisation's role in advocating for international students and creating spaces where diverse perspectives can be shared. I am grateful to everyone who contributed so openly and thoughtfully to the panel and subsequent discussions, from which the themes and insights conveyed in this report emerged.

I wish to extend particular thanks to Dr Orla Lehane and the team at ICOS, as well as to John Joe O'Farrell and colleagues at ATU, for intentionally creating the conditions for participation, relationship-building and connection during the seminar that exemplified what is possible when inclusion is placed at the heart of international engagement.

I hope this report encourages readers to reflect on their own roles and consider the practical steps they can take to enhance the experiences of international students in Ireland. Above all, I hope it helps keep students' own perspectives at the centre of those conversations.



Dr Holly Cowman

Former Chair (2024 – 2026), Irish Council for International Students (ICOS)

Executive Summary

Being present is not the same as belonging.

Ireland has significant ambitions for international education. International students are an important part of Irish higher education, bringing knowledge, perspectives and experiences that enrich institutions and communities. Yet the quality of international education cannot be measured through enrolment figures, academic standards or economic contribution alone. It must also be understood through the experiences of students who come here to study and build a life.

What helps international students feel that they belong? What makes connection more difficult? And how can students have greater opportunities to participate in and shape the institutions and communities of which they are part?

These questions were at the heart of Here to Belong, a seminar organised by the Irish Council for International Students (ICOS) and held at Atlantic Technological University (ATU) in Galway on 25 June 2026. Drawing on discussions between international students, education providers, public bodies, student organisations and wider civil society, alongside relevant research and policy, this report explores what belonging means in practice and how it can be strengthened.

What we heard

A central message emerged: belonging is not created through a single welcome event, service or programme. It develops through everyday experiences, relationships and opportunities to participate, shaped by the wider conditions in which students live and study.

Five interconnected themes were identified:

- **Arrival matters.** Clear information, practical support and early opportunities to connect can help students navigate unfamiliar systems and begin finding their place.
- **Relationships create opportunities for belonging.** Friendships, societies, classmates and shared activities can help students develop connections. Relationships take different forms, and no single route works for everyone.
- **Being heard should create opportunities for influence.** Student voice involves more than consultation. Students need meaningful ways to contribute to decisions and understand what happens after they raise concerns.
- **Belonging extends beyond campus.** Housing, immigration, safety, public attitudes and opportunities to participate in local life shape students' experiences of Ireland.
- **International students are participants and contributors.** Their knowledge, perspectives and everyday participation help shape institutions and communities. Their place in Irish life extends beyond the support they need or the economic value they bring.

Together, these themes point towards a broader understanding of belonging: not only feeling welcome, but being able to participate, exercise rights, influence decisions and feel part of the places in which students live.

Priorities for action

Drawing on the seminar discussions and wider analysis, ICOS has identified five connected priorities for education providers, policymakers, student organisations and communities, working with international students:

- **Begin before arrival:** Provide reliable information, early opportunities for connection and continuing orientation.
- **Enable relationships:** Create varied and inclusive opportunities for connection through shared interests and activities, recognising that relationships develop in different ways.
- **Turn voice into influence:** Strengthen opportunities for students to inform decisions, raise issues that matter to them and receive meaningful responses.
- **Connect campus and community:** Build partnerships that create opportunities for students and local communities to participate and contribute together.
- **Recognise participation and contribution:** Make students' academic, social, cultural and community participation more visible, without treating contribution as something they must demonstrate to belong.

Many institutions and organisations are already doing valuable work in these areas. The challenge is to build on what exists, remove barriers and strengthen the connections between different forms of support and participation.

Belonging cannot be the responsibility of international students alone. It is shaped by the actions of institutions, policymakers, public bodies, students and wider communities, as well as the systems that affect students' everyday lives. Creating the conditions for belonging therefore requires shared and continuing action.

Belonging is not an optional addition to international education. It is part of what high-quality international education should mean.

Contents

Foreword 1

Executive Summary 3

What we heard 3

Priorities for action 4

1. Introduction 7

What do we mean by international education? 7

What do we mean by international students? 7

What do we mean by belonging? 8

2. International Education in an Outward-Looking Ireland 9

2.1 International education and Ireland's global engagement 9

2.2 Beyond attracting students: the quality of the experience 10

2.3 ICOS in a changing international education landscape 10

2.4 From policy ambition to lived experience 11

3. Here to Belong: 12

3.1 Creating a space for conversation 12

3.2 Starting with student perspectives 12

3.3 Bringing different voices into the discussion 13

3.4 From conversations to recurring themes 13

4. What We Heard: 14

4.1 From Arrival to Belonging 14

4.2 Belonging Is Built Through Relationships 15

4.3 Student Voice: From Being Heard to Having Influence 17

4.4 Belonging Beyond Campus 18

4.5 Belonging Through Participation and Contribution 19

5. From Policy to Experience: 21

5.1 Belonging is built through people and place 21

5.2 Quality becomes real in everyday experience 21

5.3 Trust is built through interaction 22

5.4 Support and participation are complementary 22

6. Priorities for Action 24

6.1 Begin before arrival 24

6.2 Create intentional opportunities for connection 25

6.3 Strengthen the route from voice to influence 25

6.4 Build bridges between campus and community 26

6.5 Recognise participation and contribution 27

From priorities to practice 27

7. Conclusion: 28

References 30

Acknowledgements 31

HERE TO BELONG

International Student Belonging and Participation in Ireland

1. Introduction

International students arrive in Ireland with more than a place on a course. They bring expectations, ambitions and imagined futures: ideas about what they might learn, who they might meet, the lives and careers they might build, and the possibilities that studying in another country might open up.

What happens after arrival helps shape those futures. Coming to Ireland to study means entering a new educational environment, but also a new place: finding somewhere to live, learning how unfamiliar systems work, forming relationships and beginning to establish a life beyond the classroom. The quality of an international student's experience is therefore shaped not only by what happens within a programme of study, but by whether they feel informed, connected, safe, heard and able to participate in the places in which they live.

All of this matters increasingly in Ireland. International students are now an important part of Irish higher education, and the country has ambitious goals for international education: to attract learners and talent, strengthen international relationships and offer education of recognised quality. But those ambitions ultimately meet the lives and expectations of individual students in their everyday experience of being here.

This report begins from a simple proposition: **being present is not the same as belonging**.

The conversations at *Here to Belong* showed that belonging is shaped by a combination of everyday relationships, practical conditions and opportunities to participate and be heard. They also pointed to a wider challenge: if Ireland wants to offer a genuinely high-quality international education experience, belonging cannot be assumed to follow automatically once a student arrives.

The distinction matters. A student may be successfully enrolled and have access to institutional services, yet still struggle to feel part of the institution or community around them. Conversely, ordinary experiences — being included in a conversation, finding a society in which they feel at home, receiving clear information when they need it or seeing that their views are taken seriously — can make a significant difference to their experience of studying and living in Ireland.

What do we mean by international education?

"International education" can describe a wide range of activity, including international student mobility, international research and partnerships, study abroad, academic exchange and the internationalisation of teaching and learning. It is therefore broader than the recruitment of students from other countries and encompasses the wider educational, institutional and community relationships that international engagement can foster.

This report focuses on one important part of that wider landscape: the experiences of international students studying and living in Ireland, and the institutions, systems and communities that shape those experiences. It considers both what Ireland offers international students and how students participate in and contribute to educational and community life here. In doing so, it approaches international education not simply as a matter of mobility or recruitment, but as an experience that unfolds across classrooms, campuses and the wider communities in which students live.

What do we mean by international students?

The term "international student" is useful, but it covers considerable diversity. Students come from different countries, cultures and educational backgrounds; study at different levels and in different types of institutions; and have different immigration statuses, financial circumstances, family situations, ambitions and previous experiences. There is therefore no single international student experience. Nor will being an "international student" necessarily be the main way students understand themselves. Connection and belonging may develop through their courses,

friendships, interests, professional identities and wider communities. Throughout this report, the term is used as a practical description of students who have come from outside Ireland to study here, while recognising the diversity within that category.

What do we mean by belonging?

Belonging is similarly complex. It is sometimes understood as feeling welcome or feeling at home. Those experiences are important, but the discussions reflected in this report point to a broader understanding.

Belonging develops through relationships: with classmates, staff, friends, communities and the places in which students live. It is shaped by practical conditions, including access to information, housing, transport and services. It also has a participatory dimension: whether students can join in, express their views, exercise their rights, influence decisions and be recognised as members of the institutions and communities around them.

There is also no single experience of belonging. What it means, and what makes it possible, will differ between students. Students themselves are best placed to say whether they feel they belong, and what strengthens or undermines that experience. Institutions can work to create the conditions for belonging, but cannot determine on students' behalf whether those efforts have succeeded.

Belonging should not therefore be understood as an expectation that international students must adapt, assimilate or make a greater effort to "fit in". It is not something that students create alone. Institutions, policymakers, Irish and international students, public bodies and local communities all help shape the conditions in which connection and participation become possible.

Nor can belonging be provided through a single service, programme or welcome event. It develops — or can be weakened — through repeated everyday experiences. In this report, belonging is therefore understood as both personal and structural: it concerns how people feel, but also the relationships, opportunities, systems and material conditions that shape those feelings. It is closely connected to the quality of the student experience, but extends beyond the campus to housing, work, community life and the wider social context in which international students live.

Here to Belong

These different dimensions of belonging were explored at the 2026 annual seminar of the Irish Council for International Students (ICOS), the national organisation advocating for the rights of international students in Ireland. Held under the theme *Here to Belong* on 25 June 2026, the seminar took place at the Galway City, Wellpark Road Campus of Atlantic Technological University (ATU), an ICOS member institution which provided the venue for the event.

The seminar brought international students into conversation with representatives from higher education institutions, public bodies, student organisations and wider civil society. Discussions focused on what helps international students feel that they belong, what makes connection more difficult, and how students might have greater opportunities to participate, contribute and influence the institutions and communities of which they are part.

The seminar was designed as a space for discussion and exchange, rather than as a formal research study, and this report does not claim to represent the experience of every international student in Ireland. Instead, it uses the perspectives shared during the day as a starting point, bringing them together with relevant research, policy and developments in international education.

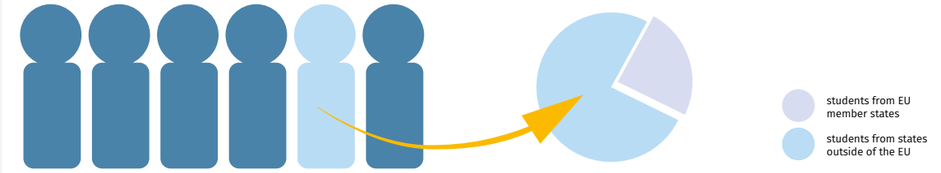
The sections that follow place those conversations within Ireland's changing international education landscape before examining five recurring themes: arrival, relationships, student voice, belonging beyond the campus, and participation and contribution. The report then considers what these themes mean for policy and practice and identifies five connected priorities for action.

Running through the report is a wider question. If Ireland's ambition goes beyond attracting students from around the world to providing a high-quality international education experience and building lasting international relationships, **what does it take for international students not simply to be here, but to belong here?**

2. International Education in an Outward-Looking Ireland

International education has become an increasingly significant part of Ireland's higher education system and its wider engagement with the world. International students now make up a substantial part of the student population and are increasingly part of the communities in which they study and live.

In the 2024/25 academic year, Irish higher education institutions recorded 44,535 non-Irish domiciled enrolments, an increase of 10.2% on the previous year. Almost 33,000 were from outside the European Union, with India, the United States and China the three largest countries of domicile. Overall, non-Irish domiciled enrolments accounted for approximately one in six enrolments in Irish higher education (Higher Education Authority, 2025).



"non-Irish domiciled enrolments accounted for approximately one in six enrolments in Irish higher education"

These numbers sit within a wider national ambition for Ireland to be internationally connected and recognised as a high-quality destination for education, research and innovation. Achieving that ambition also raises a question about experience: what does high-quality international education look and feel like for the students who come here? This report focuses on that part of the wider picture.

2.1 International education and Ireland's global engagement

Ireland has given increasing strategic importance to international education over successive national strategies. The current framework, *Global Citizens 2030: Ireland's Talent and Innovation Strategy*, seeks to position Ireland as a first-choice destination for international learners, researchers and innovators. It connects international education with Ireland's global engagement, research, innovation, skills and international relationships (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2024).

International education is therefore about more than recruitment. The Higher Education Authority describes it as contributing to the quality of learning, teaching and research and as an investment in future global relationships (Higher Education Authority, n.d.). As Ireland develops its approach to international education, the experiences of students who come here must be understood as part of that wider ambition.

International students contribute economically and through the knowledge, skills, relationships and perspectives they bring and develop while they are here. Their experience can also shape lasting personal, professional and institutional relationships

with Ireland after their studies have ended. For that reason, the quality of the experience matters not only to individual students and institutions, but to Ireland's wider international ambitions.

2.2 Beyond attracting students: the quality of the experience

Alongside the growth in international student enrolments, there has been increasing policy attention to quality, learner protection and the support international students receive while studying in Ireland.

A particularly important development is TrustEd Ireland, the statutory International Education Mark administered by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). The framework establishes expectations relating not only to academic provision, but also to recruitment, information, transparency, learner protection and support for international students (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2024).

This reflects a broader shift towards considering what happens after students arrive, as well as how they are recruited. Quality is not only about the programme a student enters or the information they receive before enrolment; it is also experienced through the conditions in which they study and live.

The wider student experience is shaped by factors that extend beyond academic provision and institutional services, including access to accommodation, immigration processes, healthcare, transport and opportunities to participate in community life. Many of these lie partly or wholly outside the control of higher education institutions, but nonetheless shape students' overall experience of studying and living in Ireland.

ICOS sees this directly in its work with students. Questions about housing, immigration, accurate information, racism, rights and unfamiliar systems regularly arise alongside academic concerns.

The discussions at *Here to Belong* reflected this broader understanding of quality. Participants spoke not only about information and support, but also about relationships, participation, safety and connection with the wider community. Academic standards and formal supports remain fundamental, but they are only part of how students experience the quality of international education.

2.3 ICOS in a changing international education landscape

Founded in 1970, the Irish Council for International Students has worked for more than five decades within an international education landscape that has changed substantially in scale, diversity, regulation and national importance.

ICOS is an independent organisation advocating for the rights of international students and works with higher education institutions, student organisations, government bodies and other stakeholders to promote high standards and a positive international student experience. Its work includes student information and support, policy and advocacy, institutional engagement, research, training and direct engagement with international students.

ICOS also manages the Ireland Fellows Programme on behalf of the Department of Foreign Affairs, linking its work on international education with international development, exchange and longer-term global relationships.

This combination of student-facing, institutional and policy work gives ICOS a particular perspective on the relationship between national policy ambitions and students' everyday experiences, including where gaps remain. Central to that work is the principle that international students should have opportunities not only to receive support, but to express their views and help shape the institutions and systems that affect them, including through ICOS' Student Advisory Group.

The *Here to Belong* seminar developed this conversation further by focusing on connection, participation, influence and contribution.

2.4 From policy ambition to lived experience

Ireland therefore enters this conversation with significant policy ambitions, developing quality frameworks and a wide range of institutional supports already in place. There is an opportunity to consider more fully how student experience, participation and belonging fit within this wider landscape.

These developments matter, but policy, standards and services do not by themselves create belonging. Research points to belonging as something that develops through academic experience, social relationships and students' interactions with institutions and the wider environment (Thomas, 2012; Mohamad and Manning, 2023).

The seminar discussions repeatedly returned to these everyday dimensions of international student life: how students are welcomed, the relationships they form, the practical barriers they encounter and whether they feel able to participate and be heard.

If Ireland wishes to be recognised as a welcoming, inclusive and high-quality place to study, students' everyday experiences are part of what will make that ambition credible in practice.

The next section turns to the experiences and perspectives shared through the *Here to Belong* seminar, exploring what enables international students to belong, to be heard and to participate as contributors to the institutions and wider communities of which they are part.

3. Here to Belong:
Listening to Student Experience

The *Here to Belong* seminar brought these wider questions of policy, quality and student experience into a shared conversation. It provided an opportunity for international students and those working across higher education, public bodies, student organisations and wider civil society to consider what belonging means in practice, and the conditions that can support or limit it.

3.1 Creating a space for conversation

ICOS' 2026 seminar, held under the theme *Here to Belong*, took place on 25 June at ATU's Galway City, Wellpark Road campus. The seminar brought together international students, ICOS members and representatives from across higher education, public bodies and civil society. Participants included representatives of universities and technological universities, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS), Enterprise Ireland, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)/TrustEd Ireland and Student Volunteer Ireland, alongside ICOS staff and Board members and other sectoral stakeholders.

This mix of perspectives reflected the seminar's focus on belonging as something shaped through relationships between students, institutions, public bodies and communities.

3.2 Starting with student perspectives

Student perspectives provided the starting point for the seminar and shaped the discussions that followed.

The opening panel brought together three current and former international students with different experiences of studying and living in Ireland. They reflected on what belonging meant to them, the relationships and experiences that had helped them feel included, and the barriers that could make participation and connection more difficult.

Their experiences anticipated many of the themes that recurred throughout the day: arrival, relationships, student representation, volunteering and participation beyond the campus.

João, a Business Studies student at ATU Galway City, brought experience of student engagement through the International Student Society and his work as a Senior International Student Ambassador.

Ksenia, a Law graduate of Trinity College Dublin, brought experience of student support, society-building and representation through Trinity Global, the DU Eastern European Society, and the ICOS Student Advisory Group.

Muskan, a Business Analytics student at the University of Galway, brought perspectives on community participation and volunteering through her involvement with Terryland Forest Park.

These contributions grounded the wider conversation in lived experience. They were not intended to represent international students as a whole, but to offer individual perspectives on questions that were then explored more widely across the seminar.

3.3 Bringing different voices into the discussion

Following the panel, participants moved into facilitated table discussions to build on what they had heard and explore belonging from a wider range of perspectives.

Each table used a set of guiding questions focused on the conditions that enable belonging, participation and contribution.

The discussions considered:

- What helps international students feel that they belong in their institution and in Ireland more broadly?
- What prevents or weakens that sense of belonging?
- What relationships, opportunities or experiences make the greatest difference?
- How can international students have greater opportunities to participate, contribute and influence the communities and institutions of which they are part?
- What could institutions, policymakers, communities and students themselves do differently to strengthen belonging and participation?

Each table had a designated notetaker and rapporteur. Key points and observations were recorded, with rapporteurs sharing the main points with the wider group.

Across the discussions, similar issues began to recur: connection, participation, student voice and the everyday conditions that can strengthen or weaken a sense of belonging.

3.4 From conversations to recurring themes

The purpose of the analysis was not to produce representative findings about all international students in Ireland, but to identify the main ideas, experiences and concerns emerging from the seminar.

Notes from the table discussions, rapporteur feedback and contributions from the student panel were reviewed, with related observations grouped together to form the principal themes presented in the following section.

Some themes arose across several discussions; others emerged strongly through individual contributions. Both informed the analysis.

In the section that follows, these themes are considered alongside relevant research, policy developments and wider evidence about international education and student experience in Ireland, to explore what they reveal about the conditions that support — or weaken — belonging in practice.

4. What We Heard:
Belonging in Practice

The seminar discussions considered how belonging can develop — or be weakened — through everyday experience. Relationships, recognition and meaningful opportunities to participate all play a part, while exclusion, insecurity and practical barriers can make belonging more difficult. The five themes that follow explore these different dimensions, from arrival and early connections to student voice, community participation and contribution.

4.1 From Arrival to Belonging

The first weeks in a new country can shape much of what follows. Starting a course is only one part of the transition for an international student. At the same time, they may be finding somewhere to live, navigating immigration requirements and learning how public transport and healthcare work. Alongside these practical adjustments, they are also becoming familiar with a new academic system, beginning to make friends and finding their place in a new community.

Panel speakers were generally positive about the welcome they had received in Ireland, describing Irish people as warm and friendly and other international students as an immediate source of connection. At the same time, several contributions captured the uncertainty of arrival: being unfamiliar with how things work and trying to find one's place.

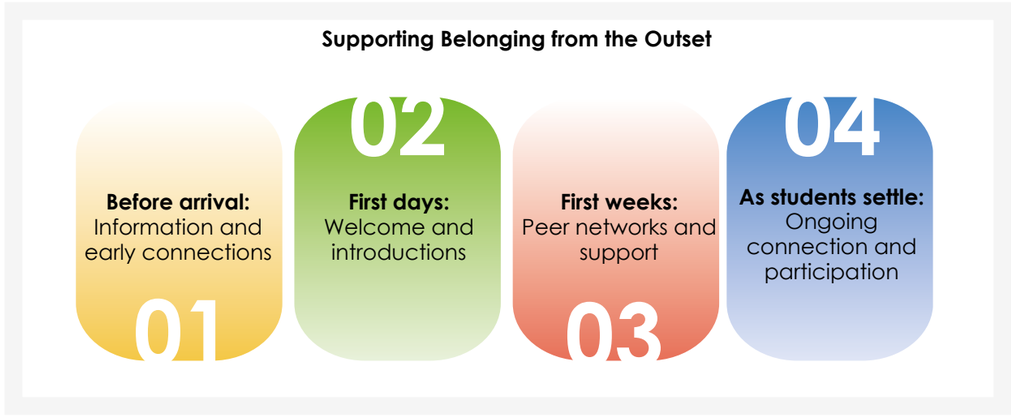
Social patterns can also form remarkably quickly. Friendship groups may develop around shared nationality, language or culture, providing familiarity and reassurance, particularly at the beginning. As social networks become established, however, students seeking new connections may find it more difficult to enter existing groups.

> **The first weeks are not simply about settling into a course. They are when students begin to work out where, and with whom, they belong.**

The panel and table discussions highlighted the role institutions can play during this period. Orientation was seen not simply as a means of providing information, but as an opportunity to create connections. Suggestions included icebreakers, buddy systems, peer introductions and activities that bring together students from different countries and backgrounds.

There was also a strong sense that arrival begins before students reach Ireland. Pre-arrival online groups can give incoming students a chance to meet peers, ask questions and begin building a network before travelling. Early connections can make the first days feel less like starting entirely from scratch.

For some students, however, the uncertainty begins before arrival in a more fundamental way. ICOS' wider work with international students highlights how visa delays, difficulties accessing appointments and changes to immigration requirements can affect whether students are able to travel, begin their studies on time or plan with confidence. These issues sit largely outside the control of education providers, but their effects are felt directly by students and by the institutions supporting them.



Connection matters, but so does knowing how things work. Clear information on accommodation and rental scams, immigration, healthcare and transport can make the transition easier. Academic systems can also take time to navigate, from finding course materials to understanding how and when to contact staff. For students using English as an additional language, unfamiliar terminology and ways of communicating can add another layer.

Orientation is therefore better understood not as a single event, but as a process that starts before arrival and continues through the first weeks. Participants called for greater consistency in the information available and practical guidance on renting and avoiding scams, immigration and everyday services, alongside opportunities to develop social connections.

This is consistent with TrustEd Ireland's emphasis on accurate information and support across the student journey, from pre-enrolment through to completion (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2024). Pre-arrival information, orientation and early support are therefore part of a high-quality international student experience.

Not every student will need the same kind of support. Some students will readily seek out societies, events and new friendships; others may find those spaces more difficult to enter. Many supports still depend on students taking the first step themselves. A welcoming first contact, an introduction to another student or an invitation that does not require someone to understand the system already can make that step easier.

Arrival should therefore be understood as a stage of the international student experience in its own right. How students are welcomed, informed and connected from the beginning can shape their opportunities to develop a sense of belonging.

4.2 Belonging Is Built Through Relationships

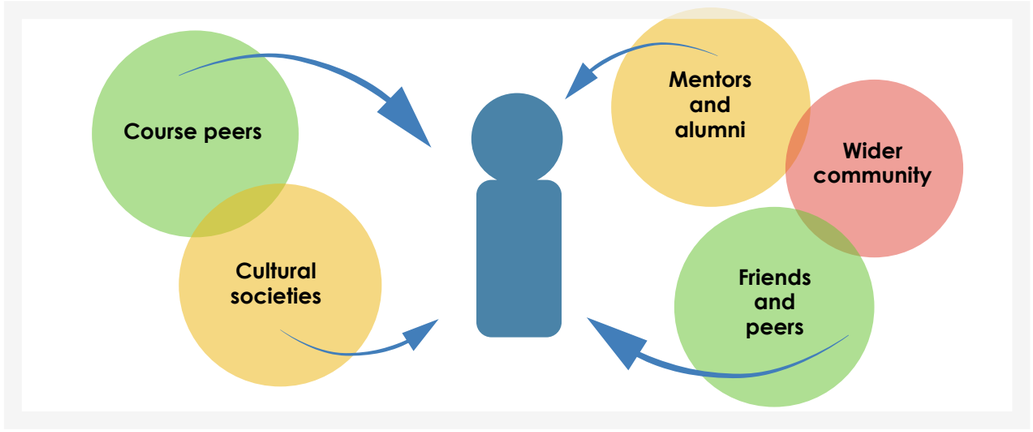
Feeling welcome is important, but belonging develops through relationships. Classmates, friends, student societies, staff, volunteers and members of the wider community can all help students begin to feel at home. The seminar highlighted the importance of spaces where these relationships can develop, from clubs and societies offering friendship and familiarity to volunteering and shared activities that bring people together around common interests. Put simply, students are more likely to feel that they belong when they have people to belong with.

International and cultural societies emerged as particularly important spaces. They can provide friendship, familiarity and practical support at a point when students may have left established networks of family and friends behind. Students also created communities themselves where representation or connection was missing, showing the value of student-led spaces and the diversity within the international student population.

Connections with people from the same country or with other international students should not be viewed as a failure of integration. These relationships can provide essential

support. At the same time, opportunities for international and Irish students to meet and develop relationships were not always easy to find. Some participants found it more difficult than expected to form connections with Irish students.

Research has similarly found that international students with a greater proportion of host-country friends reported higher levels of satisfaction and social connectedness, and lower levels of homesickness (Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune, 2011). The aim is not to replace one network with another, but to widen the range of relationships available to students while allowing them to maintain connections with their own cultures and communities.



Belonging develops through multiple, overlapping relationships on campus and beyond it.

Not everyone finds these relationships equally easy to access. Societies and events may technically be open to everyone while working best for students who already feel confident enough to enter an unfamiliar space and introduce themselves. A student social culture centred heavily on pubs or alcohol can also narrow the routes through which some students make friends.

Providing opportunities is therefore only part of the task. Attention is also needed to how relationships are enabled. Peer programmes and informal course-based activities can create more routes into connection. The aim is not to manufacture friendships, but to make it easier for relationships to begin.

There is research support for taking a more intentional approach. Caligiuri et al. (2020), for example, found that a semester-long classroom activity designed to foster interaction between international and domestic students increased international students' sense of belonging and perceived social support. The wider significance is not that every institution should replicate a particular programme, but that placing diverse groups on the same campus does not guarantee meaningful interaction.

An internationally diverse campus does not automatically create an intercultural community.

This is also where reciprocity matters. Belonging should not be treated as something international students are responsible for achieving by attending more events or making a greater effort to "integrate". Irish students, institutions and local communities are also part of creating the conditions in which meaningful connections can develop.

The aim is not to prescribe how students should socialise or who their friends should be. It is to ensure that they have genuine opportunities to build a range of relationships through which being in Ireland can gradually become belonging in Ireland.

4.3 Student Voice: From Being Heard to Having Influence

International students need opportunities to speak about their experiences, but voice involves more than being asked for an opinion. An important distinction emerged between being listened to and being able to influence what happens next.

At institutional level, the student panel was generally positive about the opportunities available. Societies, students' unions, international offices and other student-facing structures were identified as important routes through which concerns could be raised, experiences shared and support sought. Participants also pointed to the ICOS Student Advisory Group as one mechanism through which international students' perspectives can inform wider policy and advocacy work.

The discussions also highlighted some limitations in the opportunities available for international students to have their voices heard and influence decisions.

One concerns who gets heard. Attending events, joining societies, serving as a representative or speaking publicly can require confidence, time and familiarity with institutional structures. Systems that depend heavily on students putting themselves forward may therefore hear most clearly from those who already feel comfortable doing so, leaving some perspectives less visible than others.

Students' unions provide an important route for representation, but general student structures may not always fully reflect the particular experiences and concerns of international students, including those relating to immigration status, language, culture or international fees. EU students from outside Ireland were identified as one group that can fall between established categories, facing many of the challenges of studying abroad without the same immigration issues as non-EEA students.

Being listened to is important. Meaningful student voice also requires a route from being heard to having influence.

Ireland's National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP), through its *Steps to Partnership* framework, provides a useful way of considering this distinction. It describes student voice as the sharing of students' lived experiences and perspectives, while student engagement involves students and staff working together to shape decision-making (NStEP, 2021). Student partnership goes further again, towards collaboration, reciprocity and shared responsibility.

The route from voice to influence can depend on where an issue needs to be addressed. Within institutions, participants described examples of concerns being raised and responses being made. Societies, students' unions and international offices could advocate with staff or help address many practical, social and academic issues directly.

Participants identified greater difficulties in influencing decisions when concerns extended beyond an institution's control. Immigration was the most prominent example. Participants described difficulties navigating and contacting the Department of Justice and frustration that concerns raised repeatedly by international students did not always appear to result in policy change. Negative public narratives around migration and housing were also seen as areas in which international students' perspectives could struggle to gain wider attention.

This points to a potential "voice gap" between where international students can raise concerns and where decisions affecting them are made. While students often have established routes for expressing their views within their institutions, many issues that shape their experiences — including immigration, housing and employment rights — require decisions beyond the institution. The challenge is therefore not simply to provide opportunities for students to speak, but to strengthen the connections between student experience, representation and decision-making at different levels.

Meaningful participation also requires multiple routes for representation. International students have different statuses, circumstances and priorities, and no single person or structure can speak for everyone.

Responsibility should not rest solely with students. Students can organise, elect representatives and raise concerns, but institutions and policymakers also need mechanisms for responding. Even where an issue cannot be resolved, explaining what has happened to a concern — or why action cannot be taken — can help build trust and confidence in the process.

The seminar therefore points towards a broader ambition for international student voice: not simply creating more opportunities for students to speak, but strengthening the route between experience, representation and influence. Where possible, international students should not only be consulted about the education system in which they participate, but help shape it.

4.4 Belonging Beyond Campus

Belonging is shaped not only by students' experiences within their institutions, but also by their relationships with the towns, cities and communities in which they live.

Society activities, volunteering, cultural events and exploring Ireland can all help students develop a relationship with the place in which they are living. Shared interests can provide particularly natural points of connection, creating opportunities to meet local people and participate in community life without the interaction being organised specifically around being an "international student".

> **Belonging has a geography. It develops through connections with people, communities and place.**

A recent HEA-commissioned report similarly describes belonging as multidimensional and co-constructed, shaped through academic and social experience as well as students' physical and cultural surroundings, including accommodation and locality (Dooley et al., 2026).

A positive campus experience can coexist with difficulties beyond it. The seminar included accounts of students feeling safe and supported within their institution while experiencing greater uncertainty elsewhere. Unfamiliar cultural norms and ways of communicating could make everyday interactions more difficult to navigate, while participants also raised concerns about racism and personal safety.

Wider public narratives matter too. Negative coverage of migration and international students, particularly where students are associated with pressures such as housing, can affect how welcome or secure students feel.

Housing is also part of this wider environment. Rental information, scams, location, commuting, security and financial pressure can all shape how easily students participate in campus and community life. Where someone lives can affect who they meet, what they can access and how connected they feel.

There are practical ways to strengthen connections beyond campus. Volunteering was one of the clearest examples from the seminar, offering opportunities to meet people, contribute and become involved in local life. Access to these opportunities is not necessarily equal, however. Costs, transport, time and unfamiliarity with local organisations can all make participation more difficult.

Institutions cannot control everything students encounter beyond campus, nor should they be expected to. They can, however, create bridges. Partnerships with volunteer organisations, local authorities, cultural organisations and community groups can provide more natural routes into local life and help connect campuses with the places around them.

These connections can also work in both directions. Shared cultural events, volunteering and community activities can create opportunities for international students and local residents to meet, exchange perspectives and contribute to the places in which they live.

International students come to Ireland to study, but they also work, volunteer, travel, make friends and establish routines. They become part of places. A genuinely welcoming international education environment therefore depends on the connections between campuses, communities and the places in which students make their lives.

4.5 Belonging Through Participation and Contribution

Discussions about international education can quickly become discussions about numbers: students recruited, enrolments recorded, fees generated, visas issued or graduates retained. These figures matter, but one of the clearest messages from the seminar was that they tell only part of the story.

The economic contribution of international students was acknowledged, including through tuition fees, employment and spending within local economies. Students themselves also incur substantial costs through tuition, visas and insurance. But neither the value nor the experience of international students should be understood primarily in economic terms.

> **International students are participants in Irish life, not simply recipients of an educational experience.**

Cultural and intellectual exchange is another important part of this picture. International students bring different languages, traditions, knowledge, perspectives and experiences into classrooms, campuses and communities. These encounters can create opportunities for people from different backgrounds to learn from one another and can shape the educational environment for all students.

Examples from the seminar included students supporting their peers, creating societies and communities where they saw a gap, representing other students and becoming involved in volunteering and community life. Together, these activities show international students actively contributing to the environments around them.

This points towards a more reciprocal understanding of internationalisation: international students are not only offered an educational experience, but also help shape the institutions and communities of which they become part.

This wider understanding of international education is also reflected in national policy. The HEA recognises internationalisation as contributing to the quality of learning, teaching and research (Higher Education Authority, n.d.), while *Global Citizens 2030* connects international education with developing the skills and competencies needed to participate in an interconnected world (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2024).

Dimension	Examples
Economic	Fees, employment and local spending
Academic	Knowledge, perspectives and classroom diversity
Cultural	Languages, traditions and intercultural exchange
Social	Societies, volunteering and community participation
Global	Relationships, alumni networks and connections with Ireland

Illustrative dimensions of international students' participation and contribution, not expectations placed on individual students.

How these contributions are represented publicly also matters. Positive accounts of international students and migrants participating in Irish life were seen as less visible than narratives associated with housing pressure, migration and other contested issues. A fuller account of international student experience would make visible the ways students and graduates participate in Irish life.

This does not mean avoiding difficult issues or presenting an unrealistically positive picture. Rather, it means ensuring that international students are visible as people with relationships, perspectives and contributions, not only as statistics within wider debates about migration or economic growth.

Some international graduates remain in Ireland, while others return home or move elsewhere. In each case, relationships formed through study, work and community life can develop into lasting personal, professional and institutional connections with Ireland.

Recognising contribution must not, however, create another test that international students are expected to pass in order to justify their presence. A positive, high-quality educational experience should not depend on demonstrating economic value, volunteering or producing a visible benefit for Ireland.

The purpose is to recognise a fuller picture: students gain knowledge, relationships and experiences through studying and living in Ireland, while campuses, workplaces and communities are also shaped by what students bring and develop while they are here.

> **International education is not a one-way exchange. It can change and enrich students, institutions and society alike.**

The challenge, then, is to look beyond how many students Ireland can attract or what they contribute in measurable terms, and consider what kinds of institutions and communities are created when people from different backgrounds learn, live and participate alongside one another.

5. From Policy to Experience:
Making Belonging Possible

Ireland's ambitions for international education are expressed through strategies, standards and commitments. International students encounter those ambitions more immediately: in the information they receive before travelling, the welcome on arrival, the response when something goes wrong and the opportunities they have to participate.

Taken together, the five themes raise a wider question about how these national ambitions translate into the everyday conditions in which belonging and participation become possible.

Belonging is personal, but it is also shaped by wider social and institutional conditions. Yuval-Davis (2006) distinguishes between feeling that one belongs and the "politics of belonging": who is recognised as belonging, and on what terms. Feeling welcome matters, but so does being treated as a legitimate member of an institution or community, whose experiences, perspectives and contributions are taken seriously. An international student may therefore feel welcomed within an institution while still encountering barriers associated with immigration status, financial pressure, racism, housing insecurity or access to services.

5.1 Belonging is built through people and place

The seminar discussions point towards an understanding of belonging as both relational and situated. Relationships develop within particular environments — classrooms, societies, workplaces, neighbourhoods and community spaces — and are shaped by the opportunities and barriers those environments create.

Creating opportunities for connection is therefore important, but their availability alone does not guarantee that relationships will develop. Attention is also needed to who can access these opportunities, what barriers remain and whose absence may otherwise go unnoticed.

This shifts responsibility away from the idea that international students must simply make a greater effort to integrate. Institutions, students and communities all have a role in creating the conditions in which meaningful relationships can develop.

Belonging, in this sense, is something people make together. It is shaped through relationships, participation and the places in which everyday life happens.

5.2 Quality becomes real in everyday experience

National strategies and quality frameworks establish important expectations. The question is how consistently those commitments are reflected in students' everyday experiences.

For a student, quality may be encountered through something as ordinary as finding a clear answer to a question. It can depend on whether pre-arrival information is accurate, whether orientation prepares them for life as well as study, whether support is easy to find and whether someone follows up when a problem is raised.

The distance between policy and experience often appears in practical details: a support may exist but be difficult to navigate, an activity may be open but hard to

access, or feedback may be sought without a visible response. Research with immigrant-background students in Spanish secondary schools illustrates a similar distinction. Rodríguez-Izquierdo (2026) found that formal commitments to inclusion could coexist with everyday interactions that questioned students' competence, voice and place within an institution. Although the context differs, the research reinforces the importance of understanding inclusion through students' lived experiences, rather than institutional commitments alone.

None of this diminishes the importance of formal standards. It shows where those standards become real. **Policy establishes expectations; everyday practice shapes how they are experienced**.

Many of the improvements discussed in this report could also benefit students more widely. Clearer information, more accessible opportunities to participate, stronger student representation and more responsive support are not important only to international students. Addressing the barriers they encounter can help institutions improve the experience of their wider student communities.

The international student experience also crosses institutional boundaries. Housing, immigration, healthcare, transport, employment and public attitudes all shape students' lives, even though no single institution can address them all. Immigration and visa systems provide a particularly clear example: delays, uncertainty or changes in requirements can affect students' ability to arrive, continue their studies or make plans, while education providers and student-support organisations may have limited ability to resolve the underlying problems. A high-quality international education experience therefore depends on both effective institutional practice and coordination between education providers, public bodies, student organisations and other relevant partners.

The task is not to promise that every difficulty can be removed. It is to reduce avoidable barriers, communicate clearly and ensure that students are not left to navigate complex systems without reliable routes to information and support.

5.3 Trust is built through interaction

TrustEd Ireland provides a formal framework for quality assurance. Trust itself, however, develops through experience.

Trust begins to develop before a student arrives, when the information provided by an institution shapes expectations of study and life in Ireland. It grows when those expectations are broadly matched by experience and can weaken when the reality is markedly different. A clear, respectful response when a student asks for help can reinforce that trust.

Every interaction can contribute to this process: with an institution, a public service, a landlord, an employer or a member of the wider community. No single encounter defines the experience, but the cumulative effect can be considerable.

Student voice makes this especially clear. Asking students about their experiences can signal that their views matter, but repeated consultation without a visible response can produce frustration and mistrust. Closing the feedback loop — even where change is not immediately possible — shows that participation has been taken seriously.

Trust also depends on the relationship between what Ireland promises and what students experience. Different institutions and public bodies have different responsibilities, but students encounter these systems as parts of one life. Their combined experiences can shape confidence not only in individual services, but in Ireland as a place to study and live.

Trust is not created by a quality mark alone. It is built — or weakened — through everyday interactions.

5.4 Support and participation are complementary

International students need appropriate information, protection and support. Opportunities to participate are an important part of a high-quality international student experience, but they do not replace these responsibilities.

This broadens the question from how students are supported to how they can also participate in and help shape the institutions and communities of which they are part.

Student voice is important here, particularly when it moves beyond consultation towards influence. So too are opportunities to lead, contribute to decision-making and participate in community life. These opportunities need to be accessible, while recognising that students have different circumstances, interests and priorities.

Support enables participation; participation does not remove the need for support.

Nor should participation become another expectation that international students must fulfil. Belonging is not something to be earned through volunteering, economic contribution or exceptional achievement. The aim is to recognise students as participants in educational and community life, while ensuring they receive the information, support and protection to which they are entitled.

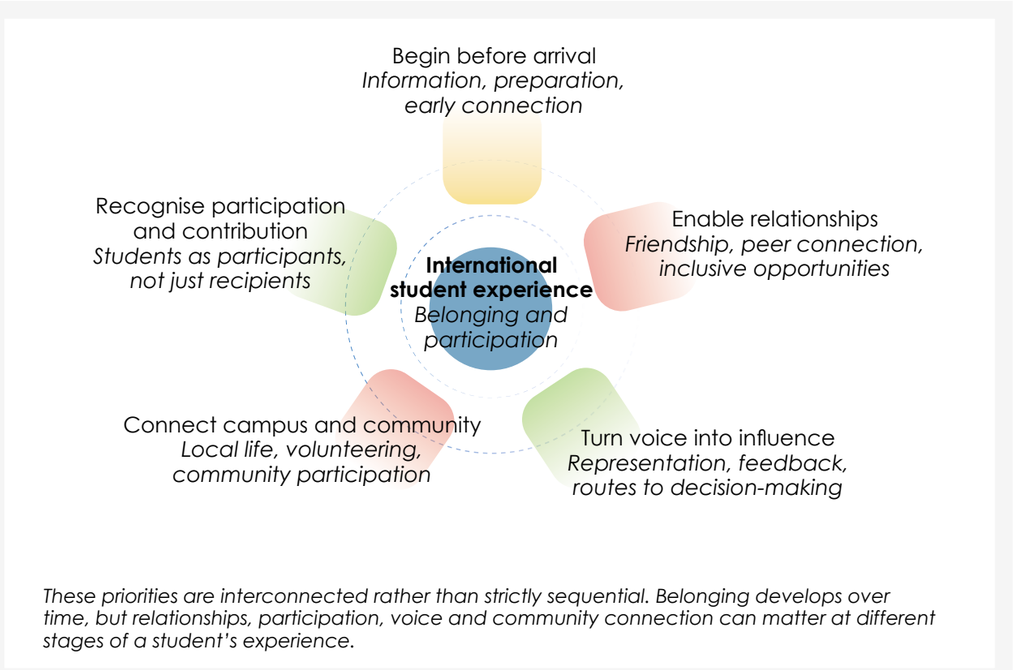
International education is something created with international students, not simply delivered to them.

The challenge is to translate these conclusions into practice. The following five priorities identify where institutions, policymakers and wider communities can act to strengthen belonging and participation in the everyday experiences of international students.

6. Priorities for Action

The seminar was not designed to produce a definitive set of recommendations. Drawing on the discussions and the wider analysis presented in this report, ICOS has identified five connected priorities for strengthening belonging and participation. These provide a framework for consideration and action by education providers, policymakers, student organisations and wider communities, working with international students.

The priorities span the international student journey, from preparing to come to Ireland and developing relationships to participating in and helping shape institutional and community life. Many institutions and organisations already have valuable initiatives in these areas. The task is not to start from scratch, but to build on what exists, strengthen connections between different forms of support and participation, and make belonging a more consistent part of how the international student experience is planned and understood.



These priorities are interconnected rather than strictly sequential. Belonging develops over time, but relationships, participation, voice and community connection can matter at different stages of a student's experience.

Five connected priorities for making belonging possible across the international student experience.

6.1 Begin before arrival

For international students, arrival in Ireland is often the culmination of months of preparation. Decisions about courses, fees, accommodation, immigration and travel have already been made. Expectations have begun to form long before a student first enters a classroom.

Creating the conditions for belonging can begin before students arrive.

Clear, accurate and accessible information can reduce uncertainty and help students prepare for the realities of living and studying in Ireland. This needs to extend beyond academic requirements to the practical aspects of everyday life.

Pre-arrival engagement can also create early opportunities for connection, allowing incoming students to ask questions, meet peers and begin developing relationships before they travel. Even a small number of early connections can make arrival feel less daunting.

Orientation should build on these early connections rather than being treated as a single event. Information and support need to remain available throughout the first weeks, as students begin navigating the practical and social realities of life in Ireland.

Priority actions include:

- Providing clear, practical pre-arrival information on housing, rental scams, immigration, healthcare, transport, employment rights and the cost of living.
- Connecting incoming students with peers, mentors or student ambassadors before they travel.
- Extending orientation across the first weeks of study rather than concentrating it in a single event.
- Making information easy to find, consistent and available in accessible language and formats.
- Ensuring students know where to go for reliable information and support when questions or problems arise.

6.2 Create intentional opportunities for connection

A diverse campus creates possibilities for intercultural learning and friendship, but proximity alone does not create relationships. Institutions can help by creating repeated opportunities for students to meet, particularly through shared interests and activities that allow relationships to develop over time.

Different students will need different routes into connection. Activities centred primarily on pubs or alcohol will not work for everyone, while events that depend on students feeling confident enough to enter an unfamiliar room and introduce themselves may unintentionally exclude others. Personal invitations, introductions and smaller-group activities can make participation easier.

International and cultural societies provide important spaces for friendship, familiarity and practical support. These connections are valuable in their own right, and societies should be supported without being expected to carry sole responsibility for creating an intercultural community. Other students, staff and the wider institution also have a role in creating opportunities for connection.

Priority actions include:

- Creating repeated opportunities for students from different backgrounds to meet through courses, campus life and shared activities.
- Supporting buddy schemes, peer mentoring and student ambassador programmes.
- Offering varied and inclusive social activities that do not centre primarily on alcohol.
- Designing opportunities that are accessible to students with different interests, circumstances and levels of confidence.
- Supporting international and cultural societies while recognising intercultural connection as a wider institutional responsibility.

6.3 Strengthen the route from voice to influence

International students may have opportunities to express their views through surveys, societies, students' unions, international offices and consultation exercises. The more difficult question is what happens after they speak.

Meaningful student voice requires a visible route from experience to response and, where possible, to influence. Students should know who has heard their concerns, what action is possible and what happens next. Where change cannot be made, an explanation can still demonstrate that their contribution has been considered.

Formal representative structures are important, but they may not capture the perspectives of all students. Multiple routes for participation are needed, including opportunities to hear from those whose experiences might otherwise be less visible.

The questions students are asked also matter. Feedback processes that focus primarily on academic provision or satisfaction with services may overlook wider experiences of belonging, participation and exclusion. Giving students opportunities to identify the issues that matter to them, rather than responding only to predetermined questions, can provide a fuller picture of their experiences.

Clearer connections are also needed between student experience and sectoral and national policy. Issues such as immigration, housing and employment rights extend beyond institutional control, so student organisations, education providers, ICOS and public bodies all have a role in ensuring that these experiences inform discussions and decisions at the appropriate level.

Priority actions include:

- Providing multiple ways for international students to contribute, including formal, informal and anonymous routes.
- Actively seeking perspectives that may otherwise be less visible, and ensuring feedback processes allow students to raise issues beyond those identified in advance by institutions or organisations.
- Strengthening connections between student societies, students' unions, international offices and institutional decision-makers.
- Strengthening regular channels between immigration authorities, education providers and student organisations, with opportunities for international students to contribute, so that recurring visa and immigration issues can be identified, communicated and considered by the responsible authorities.
- Closing the feedback loop by communicating what happens after students raise concerns and involving them in developing responses where possible.
- Creating clearer and more regular routes for international student experience to inform sectoral and national policy.

6.4 Build bridges between campus and community

International students' experiences of Ireland extend beyond their institutions, into the neighbourhoods, workplaces, public spaces and communities in which they live.

Institutions cannot control everything that happens beyond the campus. They can, however, help to create bridges.

Partnerships with local organisations can create opportunities for students to participate in community life and develop relationships beyond their institutions. Connections are often easier to build around shared interests or activities than around fixed categories of "international" and "local".

Practical barriers must also be considered. An activity may be open in principle while remaining difficult to access because of cost, transport, timing or lack of information. Reducing these barriers can widen participation.

Community engagement should also be reciprocal. Rather than focusing only on helping international students become involved in existing activities, it can create opportunities for students and other community members to participate, exchange perspectives and contribute to local life together.

Priority actions include:

- Developing partnerships with local authorities, voluntary, cultural, sporting and community organisations.
- Creating opportunities for students and local people to meet through shared interests and activities.
- Reducing financial, transport, timing and information barriers to participation.
- Opening cultural and international events to wider local communities.
- Designing community engagement as a reciprocal process in which students and communities can learn from and contribute to one another.

6.5 Recognise participation and contribution

International students are often discussed in terms of recruitment, fees, skills or economic impact. At other times, attention focuses on the barriers they encounter and the support they require. Both are important, but neither is complete.

A fuller understanding of international education also recognises international students as participants in academic, institutional and community life. Their knowledge, perspectives, relationships and everyday participation help shape the places in which they study and live.

This should be reflected in how international education is discussed and represented. Alongside economic measures and accounts of student support, institutions and public bodies can give greater visibility to students' academic, social, cultural and community participation, including through opportunities for international students to share their own experiences and perspectives.

Recognising contribution should not, however, create an expectation that students must demonstrate their value. Belonging is not something to be earned through exceptional achievement, economic contribution or volunteering. The aim is to recognise international students as part of the institutions and communities they help shape.

Priority actions include:

- Recognising academic, social, cultural and community participation alongside economic contribution.
- Creating opportunities for international students and graduates to share their experiences and perspectives in institutional and public discussions.
- Recognising the role of international students in shaping teaching, learning, campus life and approaches to internationalisation.
- Making international students' everyday participation more visible in institutional and public narratives about international education.
- Recognising and celebrating contribution without presenting exceptional achievement, economic value or volunteering as a condition of belonging.

From priorities to practice

These five priorities are closely connected and mutually reinforcing. Strengthening belonging and participation requires attention not only to individual initiatives, but also to how different forms of support, engagement and representation work together.

No single institution or organisation can deliver all of this alone. Some actions fall within the responsibilities of education providers; others require cooperation with students' unions, public bodies, community organisations, local authorities and national policymakers. International students should be involved not only as participants in individual initiatives, but as partners in designing, reviewing and improving them.

A practical starting point is to examine the international student experience through the lens of belonging. Where are connections already being created? Who finds them easiest to access, and who may be missing? Where do students repeatedly encounter confusion or exclusion? What happens after they raise a concern? How are international students involved in shaping and evaluating responses? Where could existing services, partnerships or activities make participation easier?

Belonging cannot be guaranteed through any single intervention. These questions offer a starting point for identifying where existing approaches can be strengthened and where cooperation between organisations can create better opportunities for belonging and participation.

7. Conclusion:
Here to Belong

Ireland has significant ambitions for international education. It seeks to attract students from around the world, provide a high-quality educational experience and build lasting international relationships. Achieving those ambitions depends not only on recruitment, policy or formal standards, but on the experiences of the students who come here.

International students arrive with ambitions of their own. They bring expectations and imagined futures: hopes about what they might learn, the people they might meet and the possibilities that studying in Ireland might open up. Their experiences of living and studying here help shape how those futures unfold.

The *Here to Belong* seminar explored the everyday conditions that can support or limit a sense of belonging. The discussions highlighted the importance of relationships, opportunities to participate and the wider environments in which students live. Belonging cannot be delivered through a single programme, service or welcome event. It develops through experiences and relationships over time, shaped by both personal circumstances and the structures around students.

Often, seemingly ordinary experiences matter: clear information at the right time, a familiar face, an invitation to participate or a concern that is heard and taken seriously. But belonging also depends on practical conditions. Housing insecurity, financial pressures, discrimination or uncertainty around immigration can undermine students' ability to settle, participate and plan for the future. These are not challenges that individual students or education providers can resolve alone.

Creating the conditions for belonging therefore requires shared and continuing action. Education providers, policymakers, public bodies, student organisations and wider communities all have responsibilities, working with international students themselves. The five priorities identified in this report offer practical starting points for strengthening existing approaches, improving connections between organisations and making student experience a more consistent consideration in decision-making.

The discussions also point towards a fuller understanding of international education. International students are not simply people to be recruited, supported or retained, nor should their value be measured primarily through fees, skills or economic contribution. They are participants in academic and community life, bringing knowledge, perspectives and experiences that help shape the institutions and places in which they study and live. International education is not simply something delivered to students; it is also shaped by their participation.

Creating the conditions for belonging is therefore not an additional feature of international education. **It is part of what high-quality international education should mean.** Ireland's ambitions must be reflected not only in its strategies, standards and international promotion, but in students' everyday experiences and in the wider systems on which they depend.

ICOS will continue to work with international students, its members, policymakers and wider partners to advance these priorities and strengthen the conditions in which students can participate, build relationships, exercise their rights and feel part of the communities around them.

International students come to Ireland to study, but their experience here is about more than education. The challenge is not simply to welcome them when they arrive, but to create the conditions in which they can build the lives and relationships they imagined.

Being here is not the same as belonging here. Turning welcome into belonging requires what happens next.

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