



## The International Student Experience: Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on International Students in Ireland



### Abstract

As part of Next Steps, the Irish Council for International Students (ICOS) investigated the impact of the pandemic from an international student perspective. The ICOS research aimed to identify the issues facing international students, the actions that can be taken to address these issues, and the lessons that can be learned to improve teaching and learning, as well as the overall international student experience in Ireland.

### Introduction

The higher education sector in Ireland has been profoundly impacted by Covid-19. International students have been significantly affected by the pandemic in terms of their academic and student experience, as well as their well-being. This research builds upon a previous study conducted in 2020 (ICOS 2020) and seeks to contribute to further discussion on the issues that international students have faced during Covid-19. The key findings within this report, though not all directly related to teaching and learning, have been found to have an impact on international students' learning experience in Ireland.

### Methodology

The research was conducted using an online survey, available in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, designed to gather both qualitative and quantitative data. Focus groups were also held to provide a more in-depth understanding of students' lived experiences. A total of 754 international students completed the survey, of which 435 were students studying in higher education institutes (HEI), with nationalities of participants spanning 70 countries. Two focus groups were conducted with English language students (ELS) and HEI students, with 7 participants of different nationalities taking part in the HEI focus group. The data analysis methodology for this study consisted of a statistical analysis, as well as coding and thematic analysis of the qualitative data. Respondents were asked questions across a range of themes, including, immigration, medical insurance, online learning and support, employment, well-being, accommodation, and racism.

### Online Learning & Student Experience

Online learning has formed the core of students' learning experience during the pandemic. Though some students mentioned the efforts of their HEI to deliver quality classes during the pandemic and positive aspects of online learning, there were also significant challenges highlighted.

Positive	Negative
Breakout rooms Zoom recordings Flexibility of online learning	Insufficient academic support Delivery solely through pre-recorded lectures Poor planning Impact on practical modules Internet, technical issues, and devices Lack of recording of classes and availability of notes Fatigue

Students also mentioned:

- That their academic performance had suffered as a result of Covid-19.
- That they were highly dissatisfied with having to pay full international tuition fees to attend online lectures, particularly when they could not avail of facilities, and owing to the lack of financial supports available to them.

Moreover, a significant challenge of online learning from an international student perspective is that it limits the cultural and social interactions they seek. Students reported not having had the full college experience due to not being on campus and having limited contact with lecturers and classmates.

### Communication & Support

39% of HEI students responded positively about the support offered by their HEI during the pandemic; however, there were also many reports from students who were unhappy. Similarly, some students were dissatisfied with the communication from their HEI, most notably, in relation to confirmation on how classes would be delivered during the pandemic.

### Immigration, Insurance & Accommodation

Students indicated issues regarding immigration, insurance and accommodation.

<b>Immigration</b>	Receiving adequate information or updates from immigration services Immigration officers when attending the immigration office Obtaining or renewing their Irish Residence Permit (IRP) due to closure of public offices during lockdown restrictions.
<b>Insurance</b>	Excessive cost Effectiveness (most students' policies do not cover basic healthcare)
<b>Accommodation</b>	Availability High rent costs Poor conditions Overcrowding

### Employment & Costs

The research revealed that students encounter significant barriers to accessing employment in their area of studies both during and after completion of their degree due to their student permission.

In relation to the Third Level Graduate Programme students reported that:

- Obtaining work experience under this permission can be very difficult.



- There is an apparent lack of knowledge about the programme or a preference not to hire candidates under this permission.

Specific concerns were also raised by non-EEA PhD students who felt:

- They do not receive sufficient recognition for the work that they do in HEIs in Ireland. Despite their important contribution to academia, they are viewed by immigration as international students rather than researchers or academic staff.
- The stipends they receive are not enough to cover their costs.
- Spouses not being permitted to work leads to further financial difficulties.

Many students also expressed concerns over the cost of living in Ireland saying that what they earn from part-time employment is not enough to cover their costs. Some respondents reported having difficulty surviving under these circumstances, which affected their studies and their mental health.

*I work 23h per week. I also do a cleaner job to complement my earning. I live anxious because of that. I buy limited food because otherwise it changes my budget and affects my savings for college.*

## Well-being

Studying abroad is, in normal circumstances, already challenging. It involves adapting to a new environment and culture, sometimes a new language, in addition to coping with being far away from family and friends. During the pandemic, international students have also had to cope with not having had the social and cultural experience they would have expected. Students have also been living with uncertainty surrounding immigration permission and renewal, as well as travel restrictions. These factors contributed to students experiencing higher level of difficulty with loneliness, depression and anxiety. Indeed, 79% of participants indicated that their mental health had suffered during the pandemic.

*I got a depression episode because of isolation. (...) It was one of the main reasons why I had to go back home because it was too hard mentally for me to stay isolated.*

## Racism

There were worrying reports regarding racism, anti-social behaviour and safety in Ireland. 40% of HEI international students indicated having witnessed or being victims of racism, with only 4% of respondents saying they reported the incident. The following is a list of reasons given by students on why these incidents were not reported:

- Believed no action would be taken
- Believed their claims would not be taken seriously
- Feared discrimination from authorities
- Believed they would not receive support regarding their allegations
- Had no proof
- Were unsure where or how to report the incident
- Feared losing their job (in cases of racism in the workplace)

Respondents also expressed frustration at the apparent lack of consequences facing young perpetrators.

*Life has been relatively positive until Covid. Before, there was probably a racist comment here and there. Now it has been happening more commonly.*

## Conclusion

The student experience is one of the most important aspects of studying abroad, often helping to establish long lasting ties between the student and Ireland. When international students return to their country of origin, they serve as 'ambassadors' for Ireland. Many international students also remain in Ireland after graduation to work and contribute to the Irish economy. Ireland has the potential to be a world leader in international education and continues to be an attractive study destination for international students. Yet, the research shows that there are significant issues facing international students, both directly and indirectly linked to teaching and learning, which need to be addressed if Ireland wishes to continue to enhance its global reputation as a destination for high-quality education.

Based on the key findings, the following recommendations can be made:

- Retaining high calibre researchers and international students rests on having immigration policies that are consistent with this objective. A revision of the permissions given to PhD students and of the pathways to employment for all students is needed.
- There are notable benefits to online learning, yet many challenges prevent students from having an enriching experience. HEIs must engage with students on developing suitable blended learning models.
- The Interim List of Eligible Programmes (ILEP) must be revised until the International Education Mark (IEM) is fully operational to ensure online and blended learning models are underpinned by quality.
- Racism is a real and serious issue affecting international students in Ireland. The implementation of the National Action Plan Against Racism (NAPAR) should be complemented by all HEIs having policies in place to address racism.
- Health insurance is very expensive for international students and its requirement is a cause of much confusion. A possible way forward would be to remove non-EEA international students from the definition included under the Health Insurance Amendment Act 2019.
- Many international students are forced to live in overcrowded conditions, a problem which significantly impacted online learning. Legislation must be enacted to address this issue.
- Further investment in affordable purpose-built student accommodation is needed.
- Mental health surfaced as a major consequence of the pandemic. Ambitions to attract new international students to Ireland must be matched by sufficient resources to fund additional supports at HEIs.



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