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Changing education – QA and the shift from teaching to learning

Author(s)	
Name:	Sean O'Reilly
Position:	Project Manager, Irish Survey of Student Engagement
Organisation:	Institutes of Technology Ireland
Country:	Ireland
E-mail address:	sean.oreilly@ioti.ie

Short bio (150 words max):

Sean O'Reilly is project manager for the Irish Survey of Student Engagement. He coordinates activities of project working groups, ensuring coherence and consistency as the project progresses. He manages engagement with institutions, project sponsors and other stakeholders. Sean began his career in education as a secondary school teacher in the United Kingdom working as head of department, initial teacher trainer and mentor. Sean spent 6 years as external school adviser and inspector. In this role, he supported school leadership teams dealing with operational and management issues including self-evaluation and external inspection. On his return to Ireland, Sean worked on communication and implementation of the Irish National Qualifications Framework and the European Qualifications Framework. He has worked as in independent consultant on a variety of projects, including research on qualifications and on engagement between education and the labour market. He has engaged extensively with national and international stakeholders, in Ireland and internationally.

Name:	Kevin Donoghue
Position:	Vice-President, Academic Affairs and Quality Assurance
Organisation:	Union of Students In Ireland
Country:	Ireland
E-mail address:	Kevin.donoghue@usi.ie

Short bio (150 words max):

Kevin Donoghue is Deputy President and Vice-President for Academic Affairs at the Union of Students of Ireland. He studied Law and Philosophy in the National University of Ireland, Galway. He sits on the boards for the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning as well as Quality & Qualifications Ireland. He also sits on the HEAR, DARE National Policy Group. Kevin is responsible for working with education officers in Students' Unions in higher education institutions throughout the country. He is also the

Irish representative for the European Students' Union and is the advocate for USI's education policy nationally and internationally.

Name: Muiris O'Connor

Position: Head of Policy and Strategic Planning

Organisation: Higher Education Authority

Country: Ireland

E-mail address: moconnor@hea.ie

Short bio (150 words max):

Muiris O'Connor is Head of Policy and Strategic Planning in the Higher Education Authority (HEA) of Ireland. Before joining the HEA, Muiris spent five years as Statistician in the Department of Education and Science, prior to which he worked with the Conference of Religious of Ireland (CORI), the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG). Muiris is a member of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) and is on the Editorial Board of Irish Educational Studies. He managed the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF), and currently works on the implementation of the ICT Action Plan and of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. Muiris was centrally involved in the planning and establishment of Ireland's National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, and he is a member of the Steering Group for the Irish Survey of Student Engagement.

Name: Jim Murray

Position: Director of Academic Affairs

Organisation: Institutes of Technology Ireland

Country: Ireland

E-mail address: jim.murray@ioti.ie

Short bio (150 words max):

Jim Murray is a historian by training. He has worked as an archivist in the National Archives of the United Kingdom (1990-5), and in university administration in Dublin City University (1995-2003) where, as Assistant Registrar, he specialised in academic policy and quality assurance. From 2003 to 2011, Jim worked in the areas of quality assurance, qualifications frameworks and qualifications recognition with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, including a two-year spell as Chief Executive. During this period, he was also a member of the board of the Irish Universities Quality Board (2008-10). In November 2011, he took up the role of Director of Academic Affairs at Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI), the representative body for 13 of Ireland's institutes of technology. In this role, he co-ordinates sectoral academic and quality assurance activities including a new project to develop a quality assurance framework for Technological Universities (TUQF).

Name:	Vivienne Patterson
Position:	Head of Statistics
Organisation:	Higher Education Authority
Country:	Ireland
E-mail address:	vpatterson@hea.ie

Short bio (150 words max):

Vivienne Patterson is Head of Statistics in the Higher Education Authority. She holds a doctorate and master's degree in science from Dublin City University and a bachelor's degree in Zoology from University College Cork. She previously worked as a Senior Researcher in the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit of Solas and the Skills Initiative Unit, a Government funded agency. Her specialist areas of research are institutional profiling as well as monitoring trends in post primary and higher education. She has project managed a number of large scale surveys such as The National First Destination of Graduates survey, The Eurostudent Survey and the Equal Access Survey. She has co-authored a number of education publications during her career publishes the annual Statistics Bulletin of higher education data. She is a member of the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) Plenary Group and the ISSE Survey Design and Technical Groups.

Name:	Lewis Purser
Position:	Director of Academic Affairs
Organisation:	The Irish Universities Association
Country:	Ireland
E-mail address:	lewis.purser@iua.ie

Short bio (150 words max):

Lewis Purser is Director (Academic Affairs) at the Irish Universities Association, where he works with the Academic Vice-Presidents across the Irish universities, and supports other groups including the admissions officers, access managers/directors, international officers, quality officers, heads of teaching and learning and heads of student services. From 1998-2005 Lewis was programme manager at the European University Association. A graduate of Trinity College Dublin and of the Graduate Institute of Development Studies at the University of Geneva, he worked from 1989-1998 with various higher education institutions in Hungary, Romania and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and with several United Nations agencies in educational, health and social fields. Lewis is co-editor of the Journal of the European Higher Education Area, and of Leadership and Governance in Higher Education. He has been a member of the European University Association's Institutional Evaluation Programme expert pool since 1998, and has undertaken reviews of universities and national higher education agencies in a dozen countries across Europe and Latin America.

Proposal

Implementation of the first national student engagement survey through partnership and collaboration

Abstract:

A unique collaborative partnership of higher education institutions, students' representatives and national agencies has implemented the first national survey of student engagement in Ireland, the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE). The partnership has achieved greater progress than would have been possible by any one group of stakeholders. The national survey, focussing on engagement of students with their higher education experience, has generated a new, valuable and rich data set to inform enhancement activities within institutions as well as informing national dialogue and policy. ISSE is based on similar surveys used in the US (since 2000) and Australasia (since 2007) and an increasing number of other countries worldwide. As such, it provides a national and international context for analysis of institutional data.

This paper outlines the rationale for development of the ISSE, explains the approach taken to implement and increasingly embed the survey into the academic cycle, and highlights a number of issues that remain under active discussion.

Text:

1. National context: Overview of the Irish higher education system

The state-funded higher education system in Ireland consists of seven universities and fourteen institutes of technology in addition to six colleges of education and a smaller number of specialised institutions. The number of students participating in higher education has increased substantially over recent decades and this trend continues with a 10% increase in numbers expected from 2011 to 2016. Currently, approximately 65% of students who complete secondary education progress to higher education. In 2012-2013, 53% of students enrolled in universities, 41% enrolled in institutes of technology and 6% enrolled in other colleges.

Following an extensive consultation process, *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* was published by the Department of Education and Skills in January 2011. This

document set out a new vision for higher education in Ireland and has led to a number of ongoing structural reforms.

The national strategy includes a series of recommendations, one of which is the development and implementation of a national survey of students. The strategy states that *"Students have a major contribution to make in influencing the design of curricula, and in reviewing and providing feedback on them. All higher education institutions should have formal structures to ensure that students are involved in curriculum design and revision."*

The concept of utilising student feedback in evaluation of teaching and research was referenced in key legislation, notably the Universities Act (1997) and the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999). In 2005, the European University Association was asked to undertake a Review of Quality Assurance in Irish Universities. The review noted the lack of systematic mechanisms to ensure that departments had regular and clear information from students regarding the quality of teaching and of the learning environment.

The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* notes that *"while substantial progress has been achieved in the intervening years, students still lack confidence in the effectiveness of current mechanisms and there remains considerable room for improvement in developing student feedback mechanisms and in closing feedback loops"* and recommends that *"every higher education institution should put in place a comprehensive anonymous student feedback system, coupled with structures to ensure that action is taken promptly in response to student concerns".* The National Strategy continues to state *"Student representatives should be involved in the process for acting on student feedback, and this process should be transparent and accessible to all students. In addition, a national student survey system should be put in place and the results published."*

2. Rationale for implementation of a national student engagement survey

Until recently, there was no national or systematic measure of the experiences of students in higher education in Ireland. Many institutions undertook student surveys internally for a variety of purposes and, indeed, the number of such surveys multiplied in some institutions.

The recommendation of the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* provided a focus for development of a national survey of students in higher education. The stated central objective of the project is to develop a valuable source of information about students' experiences of higher education by investigating how students engage with their learning environments. This information will support institutions to identify practice and provision that are effective and will inform discussion on aspects of existing practice that present particular issues or challenges. The results of the survey are intended to add value primarily at institutional level, while also informing national discussion and policy. There are specific advantages to a national survey, enabling institutions to consider results for local student cohorts in the context of similar institution-types nationally,

overall national results and, to some extent, relative to equivalent surveys undertaken internationally.

The objectives for developing and implementing the survey were:

- To increase transparency in relation to the student experience in higher education institutions
- To enable direct student input on levels of engagement and satisfaction with their higher education institution
- To identify good practice that enhances the student experience
- To assist institutions to identify issues and challenges affecting the student experience
- To serve as a guide for continual enhancement of institutions' teaching and learning and student engagement
- To document the experiences of the student population, thus enabling year on year comparisons of key performance indicators
- To facilitate comparison with higher education institutions and systems internationally.

3. Approach / strategy adopted

Early discussion of the potential project identified that two key elements were likely to be important for success: partnership and learning from effective practice elsewhere

3.1 Partnership

The unique partnership structure put in place across the sector to manage, direct and implement the survey project has proved highly effective. The project is co-sponsored by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI), the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI).

The HEA (www.hea.ie) is the statutory funding authority for the state higher education sector and is the advisory body to the Minister for Education and Skills in relation to the sector. IOTI (www.ioti.ie) is the representative body for thirteen of Ireland's Institutes of Technology. The IUA (www.iua.ie) is the representative body for Ireland's seven universities. USI (www.usi.ie) is the national representative body for students in higher education.

A collaborative partnership approach was adopted to ensure that the expectations, concerns and aspirations of multiple stakeholders were addressed as the project was planned and implemented. The explicit visibility of the four co-sponsoring organisations was designed to clearly signal the collaborative intent. Working groups were established to consider specific issues including survey design, technical issues, data analysis and communication and reporting. Each of these groups reported to an overall Plenary Advisory Group. The statutory quality assurance agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, participates in the Plenary Advisory Group.

All groups were representative of institutions, relevant national agencies and the Union of Students in Ireland.

3.2 Based on effective international practice

A specific working group was established to consider survey design. The survey design group undertook research into effective practice internationally and determined that a survey focussing on student engagement would most effectively meet the stated objectives for the project.

The survey seeks to collect information on student engagement in order to provide a more valuable and informed insight into the experience of students. Student engagement with college life is important in enabling them to develop key capabilities such as critical thinking, problem-solving, writing skills, team work and communication skills.

Student engagement is enhanced through involving students in educational processes that enable them to construct their learning and knowledge. Measuring engagement can provide a means to develop a fuller understanding of the student experience above and beyond that ascertained through student satisfaction surveys.

Students are asked over one hundred questions about their experiences of higher education. They respond by selecting the most appropriate response from the options provided. Response data is provided for each institution, similar institution-types and overall nationally and this data can be analysed by many variables such as gender, part-time or full-time, field of study, national or non-national, and so on.

In addition to response data for each question, a set of overarching categories or "indices" are used. Each question contributes to specific indices relating to student Engagement or Outcomes. The indices are:

Engagement Indices

- **Academic Challenge:** the extent to which expectations and assessments challenge students to learn
- **Active Learning:** students' efforts to actively construct knowledge
- **Student – Staff Interactions**: the level and nature of students' contact and interactions with teaching staff
- **Enriching Educational Experiences:** students' participation in broadening educational activities
- **Supportive Learning Environment:** students' feelings of support within the University ('college') community
- **Work Integrated Learning:** integration of employment-focused work experiences into study

Outcomes Indices

- **Higher Order Thinking:** participation in higher order forms of thinking

- *General Learning Outcomes:* development of general competencies
- *General Development Outcomes:* development of general forms of individual and social development
- *Career Readiness:* preparation for participation in the professional workforce
- *Overall Satisfaction:* students' overall satisfaction with their educational experience

Questions offer different numbers of possible responses and different numbers of questions contribute to each index. This means that, while the indices have a 100 point scale, they cannot be read as simple percentages. Rather, the index scores provide an indication of the experience of particular groups of the student body relative to the experience of other groups. For example, the data signals possible areas of interest in the experiences of first year students in particular fields of study, or the experiences of full-time students relative to part-time students, or the experiences of a specific local subgroup with similar subgroups nationally. The Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) is based on the extensively used US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE). The indices used correspond to those originating with the NSSE in addition to those developed specifically for the AUSSE. Therefore, Irish institutions also have the opportunity to consider their data compared to international data, although this should be done with care in order to reflect national and cultural contexts.

4. Barriers and problems encountered

One of the earliest challenges was to optimise the project to meet expectations of all stakeholders while also gaining credibility as an objective and robust instrument to support enhancement of teaching and learning.

Each of the co-sponsoring organisations and partners has different remits and, therefore, distinct aspirations and expectations for this project. State agencies have legitimate reasons to seek explicit measurable data that would inform quality indicators and provide an insight into the experience of students. Institutions have multiple possible uses for the data. These range from uses of data in quality assurance processes to uses of data to enhance teaching and learning. Students have expectations that they will receive effective feedback and that appropriate action will follow. In addition, it is perceived that the wider public has an interest in the performance of higher education institutions and, therefore, that there may be some media interest in any results. Some concern has been expressed that public reporting of survey results may result in third party analysis that is superficial, simplistic or simply inaccurate. The complexity of the survey instrument contributes to the risk of misinterpretation because of the statistical calculations used to generate scores for each engagement or outcomes index. Nevertheless, the comparability to similar instruments widely used internationally provides one of the key benefits to its implementation.

5. Policies and tools to overcome these issues

The collaborative partnership approach, outlined earlier in this paper, has proved highly effective to manage, direct and implement the survey project. It has ensured that all stakeholders' views are heard and that decision-making reflects the expectations, concerns and aspirations of all partners. Project governance structures are explicit and the project has consulted with senior managers of participating institutions at key development points.

Within this structure, the survey design working group has played a key role. The group, chaired by a respected academic, researched effective practice internationally and determined that a survey focussing on student engagement would most effectively meet the stated objectives for the project.

The ISSE is based on extensive research conducted in Australia, New Zealand and the US. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has been in operation in the US, and beyond, since 2000. The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) is based on the NSSE but has incorporated additional elements. It has been in operation since 2007 and is increasingly used in Australia and New Zealand. Both of these surveys are designed to measure student engagement. The ISSE is based closely on the AUSSE. Detailed pre-testing was undertaken with students to ensure that the questions used were understood in the Irish national context. These activities and subsequent post-fieldwork testing demonstrate the validity of the ISSE in the national context. The similarities between the three surveys will enable Irish higher education institutions to consider the experiences of their students compared to students in the Australasia and the US.

A number of procedures were undertaken to test the validity and reliability of the ISSE. These included expert review, focus groups, cognitive interviews and post-fieldwork reliability tests. Focus groups and cognitive interviews were conducted in four Universities, four Institutes of Technology and one College of Education in advance of the national pilot. The vast majority of students found no issues, or only minor issues, when completing or understanding the purpose of the questionnaire. The wording of some individual questions was amended to make them more culturally appropriate to the Irish higher education system. As research postgraduate students reported that the questions were generally not relevant to their experience of higher education, it was decided not to include that cohort in initial implementations of the survey. It is intended to develop an appropriate set of questions to meet the needs of these students in the future.

Post-fieldwork reliability tests demonstrate the overall reliability of the ISSE in the national context. The detail of this testing will inform further development of the survey instrument to maximise its value as a high-quality information source.

Publication of results from the 2013 pilot survey and from the 2014 ISSE has been managed carefully, with an explicit focus on ensuring that participating institutions are supported and prepared for provision of feedback to students and to staff in addition to managing any external queries that may arise.

6. Current status

The pilot national survey was widely regarded as successful, demonstrating that there are specific benefits to a national survey and that the approach taken broadly meets the requirements of multiple project partners. It has proven that a survey of student engagement provides a particular insight into the student experience and generates a rich and valuable set of data. Partners agreed that the project should continue and funding is committed to ensure that the Irish Survey of Student Engagement will be implemented in 2014, 2015 and 2016. It is expected that a full review will be undertaken during this time to determine whether any changes are appropriate.

In 2013, a specific question was included asking students for their views on the survey itself. Responses addressed satisfaction with the survey, length of the survey and the appropriateness of questions to different student groups. Examples of comments from students included:

> *"The survey was pretty interesting and made me reflect on my own academic year and my performance during classes. Overall it's a very good survey."*

> *"I think the survey is a great idea. It is very important to allow the students to voice their opinion and I would appreciate it if the survey is asked to every student before they complete their studies."*

> *"I think it would be important that the results would be made available not only to University staff but to students as well."*

> *"I'm happy with this survey so far, and I hope the information provided will actually lead to action, more so than just providing the college with information."*

Twenty six institutions participated in the 2013 national pilot and 12,732 students provided responses to the survey, representing 10.9% of the target population. Additional institutions joined the project in 2014 which led to thirty institutions participating. Almost 20,000 students responded to the survey, representing 15.6% of the target population. Interest from other institutions reflects positive perceptions of the survey and the increased response rate from students demonstrates more effective planning at institutional level as well as logistical improvements by the project at national level in order to act upon experience gained during the pilot phase.

The response rate means that the data is valid and reliable at national level and for similar institution-types. However, it is acknowledged that individual institutions will derive greatest value from the survey when there is a sufficiently high response rate to enable analysis of results for particular sub-groups of the student population within that institution. This remains one of the key objectives for the project.

Results from the 2013 pilot and from 2014 are broadly comparable to results from Australasia for most indices, although data relating to student-staff interactions merit further consideration in the context of an ongoing national focus on the transition from upper secondary education to higher education.

7. Lessons learned

Implementation of ISSE has demonstrated the vital importance of consultation and partnership between students, institutions and relevant national agencies. It has proved very effective to complement project working groups with regular communication and consultation with senior institutional personnel. The support of Presidents and Registrars is essential to the successful implementation of such an important collaborative project and it is important that the national project does not simply assume that institutional representatives on working groups have sufficient regular opportunities to discuss emerging issues and progress with these key decision-makers. Communication with institutions adopted a multi-layered approach to ensure that relevant information was provided in a timely manner to senior staff, members of working groups and to those personnel responsible for practical implementation, such as those with technical and student support services responsibilities.

Rigorous and robust testing of the survey instrument was an essential factor contributing to the project's credibility with academic staff. It is important that the survey is not regarded simply as a bureaucratic exercise but as a well-planned robust project based on meeting the standards expected of academic research.

Implementation of the national pilot in 2013 illustrated significant variation in academic calendars between institutions. The project accommodated this variation in 2014 by providing a structure that enabled institutions to select the most appropriate three-week period to open the survey to their students. All institutions' fieldwork took place within an agreed larger national period, enabling data to be presented, analysed and reported at the national level. The ability to provide flexibility to accommodate local factors is regarded as an important aspect of the project's long-term future.

8. Continuing objectives

The Irish Survey of Student Engagement has identified the following continuing objectives:

a) To increase the awareness amongst staff of the value and benefits of the data generated by the national survey so that they encourage greater student participation and begin to interpret relevant data themselves
b) To ensure that relevant and timely feedback is provided to students and to staff
c) To demonstrate that survey results are being used to improve the experience of students by influencing policy and planning
d) To support enhanced institutional capacity to analyse, interpret and utilise ISSE data

The presentation will reflect on how the partnership continues to address these objectives. The timing and style of national reporting has changed since the 2013 pilot with the intention of increased promotion opportunities with staff and students. A series of practical workshops have been organised to support institutional capacity to analyse and interpret data from the survey. Engagement with survey results also features in

planned dialogue between national agencies and individual institutions, signalling potential use of the data to influence national policy.

References

The national report of implementation of the 2013 pilot (summary and full reference versions) has been published on www.studentsurvey.ie

A book chapter titled "The collaborative development and implementation of the Irish Survey of Student Engagement" is included in the book "Engaging University Students: International insights from system-wide studies" published in 2014 by Springer.

The first of two national reports from ISSE 2014 was published in October 2014 on www.studentsurvey.ie

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Questions for discussion:

Implementation of ISSE has identified a number of key questions to be considered. These questions will be raised during the session with the intention of generating discussion and feedback.

a) How can a single national survey meet multiple, competing, needs at institutional level? For example, the needs of teaching and learning units, quality processes, external review agencies, the student body....
b) How should we regard such a survey? Is it possible to reconcile its use as a source of data to support enhancement of teaching and learning and its use as a data set to inform quality assurance processes?
c) What issues should be considered when addressing the transparency challenge? Given different possible uses of the data and its potentially sensitive nature, what level of detail is it appropriate to publish?

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 25 July 2014 to Gemma Fagan (Gemma.Fagan@eua.be). The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.