Live and Learn in Ireland: Supporting International Students

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Abstract : In the last 20 years, Ireland has enjoyed an upsurge in the number of international students coming to avail of its well-regarded Higher Education system. While welcome, the influx of international students has posed a number of cultural, social and academic challenges for the Irish HE sector, both at institutional and individual lecturer level. Notwithstanding the challenge to the Irish HE sector, the difficulties that incoming students face needs to be acknowledged and addressed. For students who have never left their home country before the transition can be daunting even if they have not learned the customs and ways of the new country. In 2013, Ireland's National Forum for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education invited submissions from interested parties to design and implement digital supports aimed at assisting students transitioning into or exiting higher education. Five colleges—the Institute of Technology, Tralee; University College Cork, Institute of Technology, Carlow; Cork Institute of Technology and Waterford Institute of Technology—collectively known as the Southern Cluster, were granted funding to research and develop digital objects to support international students' transition into the Irish higher education system. One of the key fundamentals of this project was its strong commitment to incorporating the student voice to help inform the design of the digital objects. The primary research method used to ascertain student views was the circulation of an online questionnaire using SurveyMonkey to existing international students in each of the five participant colleges. The questionnaire sought to examine the experiences and opinions of the students in relation to three main aspects of their living and studying in Ireland (hence the name of the project LiveAndLearnInIreland) (1) the academic environment (2) the social aspects of living in Ireland and (3) the practical aspects of living in Ireland. The response to the survey (n=573), revealed a number of sometimes surprising issues and themes for the digital objects to address. The research, therefore, offers insight into the types of concerns that any college, whether in Ireland or further afield, needs to take into consideration, if it is to genuinely assist what can be a difficult transition for the international student. That said, while there are a number of themes that emerged that have international implications there are other themes that have a particular resonance for the Irish HE sector.

Keywords : international, transition, support, inclusion
Conference Title : ICHE 2016 : International Conference on Higher Education
Conference Location : Boston, United States
Conference Dates : April 25-26, 2016