

International Students into the Irish Higher Education System: Supporting the Transition

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Abstract : The sharp rise in international students into Ireland has provided colleges with a number of opportunities but also a number of challenges, both at an institutional and individual lecturer level and of course for the incoming student. Previously, Ireland's population, particularly its higher education student population was largely homogenous, largely drawn from its own shores and thus reflecting the ethnic, cultural and religious demographics of the day. However, over the twenty years Ireland witnessed considerable economic growth, downturn and subsequent growth all of which has resulted in an Ireland that has changed both culturally and demographically. Propelled by Ireland's economic success up to the late 2000s, one of the defining features of this change was an unprecedented rise in the number of migrants, both academic and economic. In 2013, Ireland's National Forum for the Enhancement for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (hereafter the National Forum) invited proposals for inter-institutional collaborative projects aimed at different student groups' transitioning in or out of higher education. Clearly, both as a country and a higher education sector we want incoming students to have a productive and enjoyable time in Ireland. One of the ways that will help the sector help the students make a successful transition is by developing strategies and policies that are well informed and student driven. This abstract outlines the research undertaken by the five colleges Institutes of Technology: Carlow; Cork; Tralee & Waterford and University College Cork) in Ireland that constitute the Southern cluster aimed at helping international students transition into the Irish higher education system. The aim of the southern clusters' project was to develop a series of online learning units that can be accessed by prospective incoming international students prior to coming to Ireland and by Irish based lecturing staff. However, in order to make the units as relevant and informed as possible there was a strong research element to the project. As part of the southern cluster's research strategy a large-scale online survey using SurveyMonkey was undertaken across the five colleges drawn from their respective international student communities. In total, there were 573 responses from students coming from over twenty different countries. The results from the survey have provided some interesting insights into the way that international students interact with and understand the Irish higher education system. The research and results will act as a model for consistent practice applicable across institutional clusters, thereby allowing institutions to minimise costs and focus on the unique aspects of transitioning international students into their institution.

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