

Chapter 8

The Irish National Student Survey: Collaborative development and implementation of a measure of student engagement

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Abstract Higher education in Ireland has gone through rapid change in the last decade. Concerns about quality have grown with expansion of the system. A number of reports have suggested that one way to address such concerns is for students to participate in evaluative

processes. A collaborative process was established involving statutory bodies, representatives from the institute of technology and university sectors and student bodies to develop the Irish National Student Survey (INSS). This chapter outlines development of the INSS, and discusses survey data which will be used to enhance student development, engagement and transition. The chapter also discusses how the INSS will be used to understand how students from diverse backgrounds as well as first-year and postgraduate students are engaging with higher education.

Introduction: An overview of the higher education system in Ireland

The higher education sector in Ireland consists of a binary system of seven universities and fourteen institutes of technology. In addition, there are seven colleges of education and a number of small specialised institutions. Approximately 60 per cent of students in higher education attend the university sector with 40 per cent attending institutes of technology. Higher education institutions in Ireland are relatively small by international standards, ranging from approximately 5,000 students in the smallest to over 20,000 students in the largest. Despite the relative size of institutions, there has been substantial growth in the number of students entering the higher education system in Ireland over the last fifty years. This is exemplified by the fact that in 1965 there were approximately 19,000 full-time students in the sector, and by 2011/2012 this had risen to 162,782 (Higher Education Authority (HEA), 2013). Approximately 65 per cent of students who complete secondary education now go onto higher education. The vast majority of students are in the age group 18-22. Mature students (undergraduates older than 23 at the commencement of their program) account for approximately 14 per cent of entrants to the sector. The vast majority of part-time entrants (88 %) are mature students. Women account for 53.5 per cent of all undergraduates and 57.0 per cent of postgraduates graduating from the higher education sector (HEA, 2013). Participation rates by students from non-European Union countries are relatively low, comprising approximately 5 per cent of all entrants.

Approximately 85 per cent of funding for the higher education sector in Ireland comes from public sources. Ireland spends 1 per cent of its GDP on higher education. A statutory body, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), is responsible for funding the sector on behalf of the state. In addition, the HEA also coordinates state investment in higher education. Tuition fees for students were abolished in 1996, however students have to pay a registration fee and this charge has increased year-on-year. The aim of the abolition of tuition fees was to increase participation rates from lower socio-economic groups, however the success of the abolition of tuition is debateable, with the greatest proportion of entrants to the higher education sector coming from higher socio-economic groups despite concerted attempts at both national and institutional levels to increase participation rates among target socio-economic groups.

Major structural reforms are underway as part of the implementation of the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030: Report of the Strategy Group* (Department of Education and Skills, 2011), which will see institutional consolidation in certain disciplinary areas (e.g. in teacher education and the creative arts) and at regional level, to ensure Irish higher education can continue to deliver high quality outcomes for individual learners and for broader economic and societal purposes.

Drivers for change: institutional, national and international

There has been growth, albeit uncoordinated, in measuring and evaluating the quality of student experience of higher education in Ireland over the last 20 years. The growth in measuring student outcomes was partially driven by a number of declarations, governmental acts and reports that have been published at national and European level on the role and function of higher education systems. Although documents and reports deal with a number of diverse issues—such as transferability of degrees, governance of universities, accountability and increasing competitiveness—a fundamental theme in the reports is the centrality and importance of ensuring the standards and quality of educational programs. Recently the assur-

ance of quality and standards has been given increasing prominence with recommendations that students become involved in the evaluation of the quality of their education program and their experience of higher education (European University Association (EUA), 2005a; 2005b).

Although there has been an exponential growth in reports recommending that students be given a voice in the measurement of the quality of their experience of higher education in Ireland, this was not always the case. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s there was little discussion of measuring quality of the student experience at policy level until the publication of a Green Paper entitled *Education for a Changing World* (Acts of the Oireachtas, 1992). This Green Paper was the first to identify the need to question the support students received during the course of study, the quality of teaching, the level of student attrition, the quality of research and the processes put in place to evaluate the quality of students' educational experiences. The theme of quality assurance in general and evaluation in particular was further advanced in the government's White Paper, *Charting our Education Future* (Acts of the Oireachtas, 1995). This paper identified a specific framework for the evaluation of academic departments including internal and external evaluations. Furthermore, the importance of evaluation was highlighted in the report from the *Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education* (HEA, 1995). The Steering Committee's main concern was that the continued expansion of the higher education sector would adversely affect the standards and quality of higher education in Ireland. To this end it was recommended that there would be a system of self-evaluation and quality audit put in place.

The 1990s also saw the publication of *The Universities Act* (Acts of the Oireachtas, 1997) and *The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act* (Acts of the Oireachtas, 1999) both of which identified that measurement should be undertaken on the quality of teaching and research and that students should be involved in the evaluation of teaching and research. *The Universities Act of 1997* was the first piece of legislation in Ireland to "specifically set out *inter alia* the responsibilities of the institutions for academic quality assurance"

(Duff *et al.* 2000, p. 59). The Act highlighted that the university sector should ensure that the highest standards in teaching and research are promoted and maintained. There was also recognition in the Act that students should be involved in the process of evaluating the quality of their experience of higher education: “the procedures shall include...assessment by those, including students, availing of the teaching, research and other services provided by the university” (Acts of the Oireachtas 1997, VII, 35, 2b). This recommendation was further reiterated in *The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999* (Acts of the Oireachtas, 1999).

Although both the 1997 and 1999 Acts recommended that students be given a voice in assessing the quality of their educational experience, no formal system was put in place. This was evident in a report by the European University Association (EUA), a body with a long history of international quality assurance reviews, commissioned by the HEA, to undertake an assessment of the higher education quality assurance systems in Ireland. This first formal review of quality assurance procedures and their effectiveness in the seven Irish universities was completed in February 2005 (EUA, 2005a; 2005b). Although the EUA review identified that quality assurance procedures were generally comparable with European universities, it was reported that the role of students in the quality assurance process was limited.

At the European level, a number of reports and communiqués have acted as drivers for assessing quality in the higher education sector in Ireland. Although none of these reports specifically refer to student engagement, they do refer to student involvement in the quality assurance process.

European Union (EU) declarations and communiqués, most notably in Bologna in 1999, Prague in 2001 and Berlin in 2003, have placed emphasis on evaluating the quality of outcomes achieved as a result of an educational program. The influential *Bologna Declaration* in 1999 espoused five central tenets as a way forward for the integration and development of the European higher education system. A criticism of the *Bologna Declaration* was the scientific and com-

petitive hegemony of the report. This was addressed to some extent in Prague by including the social dimension of higher education and the need to stress “the importance of students as partners in European higher education” (Wächter 2004, p.266). In the *Berlin Declaration* of 2003 quality assurance was also given prominence to counterbalance the emphasis on competitiveness outlined so strongly in the *Bologna Declaration* (Wächter 2004). The *Berlin Declaration* (2003), as in previous declarations, stressed the need to develop mutually shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance. Central to this process of quality assurance was a recommendation that national quality assurance systems should include “evaluation of programs or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, *participation* of students and publication of results” (*emphasis added*) (p. 3). No specific information was provided however on how these evaluation processes should be structured at national or European level. However, the prominence given to quality assurance matched or in some cases surpassed the prominence given to compatibility and comparability of degrees outlined in the *Bologna Declaration*.

As well as national and European reports and recommendations, the growth in the proportion of school-leavers attending higher education in Ireland has also been a driver in developing measures of the quality of the student experience. In particular there was concern about the progression rates of students within the Irish higher education system due to rapid growth of the sector and the diversity of entrants. In particular there was an on-going debate that the massification of the higher education sector may be problematic in ensuring the quality of the student experience.

Development of a measure of student engagement in Ireland

Background to the development

Until the advent of the current project, no national or systematic system of measuring the quality of student experience of higher edu-

cation in Ireland was in place. However, student surveys were undertaken at individual institutes of technology and universities. These were based on a number of models including the Course Experience Questionnaire (Ramsden, 1991), the national student survey in the United Kingdom, National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh, 2001), Australasia Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) (Coates, 2010) and locally developed surveys. No national data on the student experience, student engagement or student satisfaction in Ireland has, to date, been published.

The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) outlined the planned strategic development of the higher education sector in Ireland over the coming decades. One specific recommendation in the report stated that: “higher education institutions should put in place systems to capture feedback from students, and use this feedback to inform institutional and program management, as well as national policy” (Department of Education and Skills 2011, p. 17). In order to implement the recommendation of the *National Strategy*, a program of research was undertaken to develop and test the Irish National Student Survey (INSS). In a unique national project, representatives from a number of key groups in higher education in Ireland were involved in the development of the survey. These included the university and institute of technology sectors (represented through the Irish Universities Association (www.iua.ie) and Institutes of Technology Ireland (www.ioti.ie) as well as staff from individual institutions in both sectors), the Higher Education Authority (www.heai.ie), Union of Students in Ireland (www.usi.ie) and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (www.qqi.ie).

Recognising the importance and centrality of the student voice in ascertaining the quality and outcomes of their student experience, the *National Strategy* further recommended 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 (Department of Education and Skills 2011, p. 17).

This recommendation was based on the acknowledgement that, despite an increase in involving students in the evaluative process, there was further room for improvement:

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 (Department of Education and Skills 2011, p. 53).

It was recognised in the *National Strategy* that students have a major contribution to make in influencing the design of curricula, and in reviewing and providing feedback on their experience of college. It was also identified that good student feedback on satisfaction and engagement will contribute to students experiencing an education that is relevant and responsive to their personal development and growth as fully engaged citizens within society.

In Spring 2012, the *National Academy for Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning* (NAIRTL) (the National Academy advises the higher education sector on policies and practices aimed at enhancing the student learning experience) completed a project to develop a framework for a national student survey (see: www.nairtl.ie/studenturvey). This phase of the project recommended that the INSS measure two constructs: student engagement and student satisfaction with their experience of higher education.

Building on the NAIRTL work, a follow up national project was put in place. This resulted in the development of a national pilot study which was rolled out in March 2013. The remit of the national project group was to develop and implement a final survey template, methodology and process for undertaking a more comprehensive national student survey of students in Ireland in 2014.

The objectives of developing a national student survey for Ireland were to:

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

The project was specifically required to: (1) develop and implement a national student survey involving all universities, institutes of technology and colleges of education by March 2013; and (2) to use the 2013 experience to develop and implement a final survey template, methodology and process for undertaking a more comprehensive national student survey in 2014. The pilot phase resulted in the development of an agreed survey instrument and the distribution of the instrument to relevant student cohorts in each participating institution. At the time of writing, the pilot phase was moving into an analysis of responses received, the publication of a report on findings of the 2013 survey, experience gained during the pilot and recommendations for implementation of a full national survey in 2014.

Based on the pretesting of the INSS, a decision was made to survey undergraduate (first and final years) and coursework postgraduate students in each public higher education institution in Ireland. After completion of the pilot in 2013, it is intended to extend partic-

ipation to the same student cohorts in all institutions offering programs leading to higher education qualifications included in the National Framework of Qualifications (www.nfq.ie) i.e. both public and private higher education institutions in Ireland.

Governance, management and stakeholders

The governance and management structures for the development of INSS were designed to ensure wide representation of partner higher education institutions. A Project Plenary Advisory Group was put in place consisting of representatives from universities, institutes of technology and the project co-sponsors (Higher Education Authority, Institutes of Technology Ireland, Irish Universities Association, Union of Students in Ireland). This Plenary Group was responsible for the overall management of the project and its objectives included to:

- guide the design and structure of a national student survey that:
 - builds on best practice internationally; and
 - utilises appropriate research methodologies and survey technologies;
- establish and embed a survey framework that will facilitate institutions' implementation of the student survey by informing and amending local policies and quality assurance procedures where appropriate;
- ensure key stakeholders within higher education, including institutional leaders and senior management, are informed of progress and outputs of the project;
- approve an agreed communication strategy to increase awareness of the project and to encourage student participation; and
- approve the structure and layout of the final report from the survey.

A number of working groups were set up to address survey design, communications, reporting, and technical issues. A full-time

project manager was appointed to lead developments and to ensure coherence and consistency between the various elements of the project.

Various stakeholders interacted with the national student survey at particular stages of the project. It is also intended that as the project is further developed and rolled out, comprehensive stakeholder participation will be put in place. Current and future stakeholders include:

- students in higher education institutions;
- staff and management of higher education institutions;
- government departments and national agencies including the Department of Education and Skills, the Higher Education Authority and Quality and Qualifications Ireland;
- representative organisations of institutions and students in the higher education sector including Irish Universities Association, Institutes of Technology Ireland and the Union of Students in Ireland; and
- prospective students and their families.

Shaping the INSS

A decision was made to base the INSS on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh, 2001) and the Australasian Study of Student Engagement (AUSSE) (Coates, 2010). The AUSSE and the NSSE are instruments widely used in higher education systems in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

A number of reasons were postulated for basing the Irish National Student Survey on the NSSE and the AUSSE. These included the following:

- The NSSE and the AUSSE have undergone extensive psychometric testing. This testing has demonstrated the validity and reliabil-

ity of the instrument as a measure of student engagement and student satisfaction. Previous testing of the instrument in the United States and Australasian higher education systems was identified as being useful in developing the protocol for testing the Irish National Student Survey in the higher education sector in Ireland.

- Using both as the basis for the Irish National Student Survey will allow universities and institutes of technology in Ireland to benchmark the levels of student engagement and educational outcomes with higher education institutions in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, South Africa, and countries where both are now widely used. One of the reasons that the Australian higher education system adopted the NSSE for the development of AUSSE was that it also facilitated cross-national comparative analysis.
- The NSSE is based on student self-reports of outcomes such as engagement and satisfaction. Student self-reports of engagement and satisfaction have been identified as valid measures of student outcomes. Furthermore, as the NSSE is a self-report measure, this gives the student a voice in the evaluative process. In addition, using the student self-report approach of evaluating the impact of an educational program is attractive from a methodological perspective in that it covers a wide range of learning and developmental outcomes. It is also attractive from a practical perspective since it is “fairly inexpensive to survey students and to ask them to report how much they have learned or changed since entering college” (Anaya, 1999, p. 501).
- The NSSE can be analysed at a number of levels, including discipline, gender, national and international students, employment status, full-time/part-time status, mature students, departure intention, distance learning and campus based students. This will allow institutions using the Irish National Student Survey to identify how various groups undertaking higher education are engaging in, and satisfied with, their experience of higher education.

- Both the NSSE and the AUSSE have been designed to be administered to the student cohorts identified to be of interest in the evaluation of student outcomes in the Irish higher education system. These include students in the first year and in the last year of their studies. A version of the AUSSE has also been developed to evaluate student outcomes from taught postgraduate programs. These groups will also be targeted by the INSS.
- The NSSE and AUSSE provide an indication of students' involvement in activities and experience of conditions that research has linked with high-quality student outcomes.
- The NSSE and AUSSE provide data that indicates the quality of the student experience. Data that can be used to guide policy to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of students studying in the higher education sector.

Building on the work done in the United States on the NSSE (Kuh, 2001) and in Australia on the AUSSE (Coates, 2010), the Irish National Student Survey is undergoing a number of testing stages prior to full administration to the higher education student population in 2014. A number of qualitative tests of the Irish National Student Survey have been undertaken, including expert review, focus group interviews and cognitive interviewing. Further psychometric testing of the instrument will be undertaken throughout 2013. The rationale for this extensive testing is to ensure that the INSS is robust enough to measure the constructs of interest in the Irish higher education system.

The following steps are involved in developing and testing the INSS:

- Stage I – Developing definitions of the constructs and domains of student engagement and satisfaction. This was achieved through an extensive review of the literature and documentation available on student surveys. This step identified two standardised outcome instruments appropriate to the measurement of engagement and

satisfaction: the NSSE (Kuh, 2001) and the AUSSE (Coates, 2010).

- Stage II – Extensive pre-testing of the questionnaires through expert review, focus group interviews and cognitive interviews (Drennan, 2003). This phase was completed in late 2012 and early 2013 with a sample of first year, final year and postgraduate student cohorts in three universities, three institutes of technology and one teacher training college. Students were recruited from a diversity of disciplines and backgrounds to ensure that a broad spectrum of potential respondents was involved in the pretesting phase of the INSS. In addition, expert review of the questionnaire was undertaken by key stakeholders involved in student surveys in the higher education sector in Ireland.
- Stage III - Instrument development and reliability and validity. This stage will use psychometric theory in further testing and developing the Irish National Student Survey. This stage will include classical test statistics (internal consistency and inter-item correlations, factor analysis and item stability). Validity will be determined through the use of content and criterion related validity tests. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses and item response theory will be used to test the construct validity of the instruments.

Reporting of the Irish National Student Survey

In addition to the development of a national report outlining student engagement in the university and institute of technology sectors in Ireland, institutions will receive a full set of their own data for internal use. A dedicated website has been developed to inform students, academics and institutions of the purpose of the survey and implications of the results (see: www.studentsurvey.ie). In addition, a number of guidelines are being developed as part of the pre-testing of the INSS to demonstrate to students, academics and institutions on how their data can be used. These processes are based on the experiences of reporting data from the NSSE and AUSSE. Proposed

reporting of the INSS includes: comparison of student engagement amongst males and females, first year and later year students as well as academic disciplines. In addition student engagement will be reported in relation to mode of study (full-time, part-time), age (mature, non-mature students), nationality (Irish, other EU, non-EU) and residence (family home, rented accommodation, campus accommodation).

It will also be emphasised to all stakeholders that the results will be used to make improvements to the student experience. It is proposed that the report on the pilot project will aggregate data at national, institute of technology, university and teacher training college levels. In addition results from the INSS will be compared to the United States, Australian and New Zealand results from their engagement surveys.

Improvement and monitoring

The development and introduction of the INSS provides a number of opportunities for the higher education sector in Ireland. The national student survey will provide, for the first time, evidence on student engagement and student satisfaction in both the institute of technology and university sectors. It is proposed that the INSS will be used in a variety of ways including enhancing the student experience of higher education through developing an understanding of student development, engagement and transition. In addition, it is proposed that the INSS will be used to develop an understanding of how students from diverse backgrounds as well as postgraduate students are engaging with higher education-cohorts on which little is known in the Irish higher education sector. The longitudinal nature of the data collected through the INSS will provide information on the extent to which student engagement changes over time, and the data collected will also inform research into the student experience of higher education in Ireland. The growing international use of student engagement measures will also allow the university system in Ireland to benchmark and compare itself with education systems in North America, Australasia and South Africa. Ultimately, the INSS

provides students with a voice in measuring the quality of their experience in higher education. The use of the INSS in improving the quality of the higher education system in Ireland is outlined in detail in the following paragraphs.

Using INSS to understand student transition, development and engagement

With 65 per cent of all school leavers now entering the higher education sector in Ireland and a substantial growth in the numbers of part-time, postgraduate, overseas and mature students attending institutes of technology and universities, issues related to the quality of the student experience are coming to the fore. The growing quality agenda, coupled with the massification of the higher education system, are resulting in academic and student support staff dealing with a number of concerns such as student retention, student engagement and problems related to student transition from secondary to higher education.

In a number of sectors and disciplines in the Irish higher education system, there are concerns regarding student attrition. The average rate of attrition for full-time undergraduate students in all higher education sectors in Ireland is 15 per cent. Individual rates of attrition are 4 per cent in teacher training colleges, nine per cent in the university sector and 22 per cent in the institute of technology sector (HEA, 2010). Factors related to attrition have been found to include gender (male), a lack of grant support, lower educational attainment at secondary level and socio-economic status (HEA, 2010). A number of initiatives, especially in first year, are in place to facilitate the retention of students within the higher education sector, with an increased emphasis on programs that encourage student engagement with the life of the college. These include programs that facilitate students to transition from second-level to third-level and student engagement resources that emphasise teamwork, critical thinking, writing skills and time-management. The need for these initiatives, it is argued, are warranted as there is evidence that levels of attrition from the higher education sector are higher during the first year of

studies than in any other year. There is also the perception that a number of students are ill-prepared or unable to cope with the demands of studying at tertiary level during this period. The general conclusion is that attrition and poor performance are related to a lack of engagement, especially during the early stages of college life (Gibney *et al.*, 2011). Although there are a variety of initiatives in place to facilitate students to transition from secondary education and to engage with higher education, the impact or merit of these programs is unknown. The implementation of the INSS will facilitate universities and institutes of technology to identify those students who are having difficulty engaging with college life and, from the data, identify programs that can facilitate engagement and, ultimately, positively enhance the student experience. As Coates (2008, p. 43) states:

Engagement data provides rich information on key aspects of students' interactions with their institutions. Analysing engagement data in light of information about attrition and retention may well expose specific patterns of interaction that are distinctive to students who choose to discontinue their courses.

There is particular emphasis in Irish higher education on the first year student experience. The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p. 18) states that "higher education institutions should prepare first-year students better for their learning experience, so that they can engage with it more successfully". In addition, the *National Strategy* recommends that the first year curricula should be reviewed and developed so that the foundation for student development in the areas of inquiry and the development of an approach towards lifelong learning.

The INSS will be targeted at first year students, final year students and coursework postgraduates. In particular, it is known that the first year within higher education is a critical time for students, setting the benchmark on the extent to which they engage with college life and the extent to which they progress through their program of study and ultimately achieve graduation:

[The] teaching and learning strategies and the student experience created on campus have a significant impact on learning outcomes. The first-year experience is regarded as particularly important in the international literature on retention as this is the period during which students are most likely to discontinue their studies (HEA 2010, p. 63).

Recent reports in Ireland have also identified that the rapid growth of the sector may lead to students being unprepared for the rigours of higher education (HEA, 2010; McGuinness *et al.*, 2012). The expansion of the system has implications for both course completion and the level of student achievement:

There is little doubt that large-scale and rapid expansion in the HE [higher education] sector has had important implications for extending HE to wider sections of society. However, it is important to assess the extent to which such widening access has implications for students' capacity to benefit from, and succeed within HE (McGuinness *et al.*, 2012, p. 42).

The trend identified in two recent reports on the higher education sector in Ireland is that the rapid expansion of the sector has led to the risk of students, especially in their first year, being left unsupported, resulting in a lack of engagement with their studies leading to the possibility of attrition (HEA, 2010; McGuinness *et al.*, 2012). However, it is acknowledged that the profile of students who do not engage with higher education is unknown. There is also a need to know the impact that the rapid expansion of the higher education sector in Ireland has not only on student retention but also on the experience of student engagement and achievement (HEA, 2010; McGuinness *et al.*, 2012).

Furthermore, recent research in Ireland has also shown that the 'high stakes' examination system at upper secondary level has developed in students a narrow focus directed towards exam prepara-

tion and exam success, and a move away from being actively involved and engaged in the teaching and learning process (Smyth and Banks 2012, p. 284). The consequence of this is that students on entering the tertiary education sector find it difficult to adapt to, and cope with, the demands of higher education, especially in their first year. Problems with transition from secondary to tertiary education are not unique to Ireland and are also evident in other countries where grade inflation at secondary education has led to problems with student achievement and integration into higher education systems (Côté and Allahar, 2007). A recent policy document on higher education in Ireland has highlighted these concerns, especially in particular subject areas:

Concern has been expressed about students entering higher education without the necessary skills and knowledge to engage effectively with learning in the disciplines of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Department of Education and Skills 2011, p. 55).

The importance of facilitating students to transition from secondary to higher education is gaining credence. A document published by Institutes of Technology Ireland (IoTI, 2013) highlights a number of initiatives in place to facilitate students to transition from secondary school to the higher education sector. This reflects a growing awareness of the need to put in place such innovations as well as identifying the extent to which such programs are successful in helping students engage with higher education. It is acknowledged with the higher education sector that there is a need to formalise the approach taken both to assist students in the transition process and enhance the first year experience (IoTI, 2013).

Student engagement, student retention and student transition are central themes in debates on higher education in Ireland. However, data on these issues are, at best, limited. The implementation of the INSS will provide data on these constructs to allow academics and researchers develop a better understanding of the extent to which various cohorts of students are interacting with their institutions. As

Coates (2008) highlights this data can inform strategies that can be used to reduce attrition as well as identifying the extent to which students are transitioning from secondary to higher education.

Furthermore, taking into consideration the growing diversity of students entering the higher education system, there is recognition that there is a need to ensure that resources are used to minimise the risk of students' non-completion of their program of study by enhancing the quality of the student experience and facilitating the student to engage with college life:

In seeking to address issues of progression and student success in Irish higher education, there is an on-going need for vigilance in relation to the quality of learning delivered and the standards of education achieved (HEA, 2010, p. 10).

The quality of learning in particular relates to the early identification of students at risk and the implementation of strategies to “enhance their motivation, engagement and performance early on in their course” (HEA, 2010, p. 53). In measuring factors related to student retention in higher education, engagement is a variable that needs to be taken into consideration with evidence emerging that institutions that engage students in the broader aspects of college life have better outcomes in terms of student progression than in higher education institutions where engagement is not emphasised (HEA, 2010). The INSS can, in part, monitor these aspects of the higher education experience. The results from the INSS can also inform strategies that can impact on student attrition, facilitate student engagement with higher education (especially in first year) and enhance the quality of the student experience.

Understanding student needs and diversity

The INSS will also be used to develop a lack of understanding of the extent to which students from diverse backgrounds engage with college life. Traditionally, students attending the higher education

sector in Ireland have been homogenous in terms of age and cultural backgrounds. Over the last decade there has been a shift in the student profile with an increase in the number of overseas students as well as a rise in mature-aged student. The change in the demographic profile of Ireland has also resulted in students from a variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds attending colleges and universities. There is evidence, however, that particular groups, especially students from minority groups, have negative experiences in engaging with higher education (Forsyth and Furlong, 2003). Results from the INSS can be used to identify the experience of students from a variety of backgrounds and the extent to which they engage with higher education. The INSS will collect a number of variables related to the profile of first year, final year and postgraduate coursework students. These include: age, gender, discipline, mode of study (part-time/full time), nationality, level of study (undergraduate or postgraduate), and sector (institute of technology or university). The data collected from these cohorts will facilitate the development of strategies that will help educators and policy makers understand the experience of minority groups and identify strategies that will enhance the quality of higher education experienced by these groups. In particular items on the INSS such as 'had conversations with students of a different ethnicity/nationality than your own' will develop an understanding of how various groups of students are experiencing and integrating into an increasingly diverse higher education sector.

Enhancing postgraduate students' experience

The number of students completing higher education at postgraduate level in Ireland has grown exponentially over the last decade; this is especially the case in the numbers completing coursework master's degrees. The increasing dominance of this degree is reflecting the reality of developments in professional working including the growth of continuing professional development and lifelong learning, the impact of information technology, the growth and specialisation of knowledge and the diversity and flexibility required for world of work. However, despite the growth in this level of higher education, there has been a lack of research on outcomes and quality

of graduate level education, especially taught or coursework postgraduate programs. These programs remain the most under-researched and least understood of all degree levels (Reid *et al.*, 2003; Katz, 2005; Drennan and Hyde, 2008). It is proposed that the introduction of the INSS will address this gap. Many students who undertake coursework postgraduate programs are working and attending college on a part-time basis. The changing nature of the work environment challenges educators to determine whether postgraduate education is meeting the needs of this cohort of students and to develop an understanding of the extent to which they engage with college.

Monitoring student engagement

Student engagement with university life is seen as important to facilitate in students the ability to develop key capabilities such as critical thinking, problem-solving, writing skills, teamwork and communication skills. Student engagement is enhanced through involving students in educational processes that enable them to construct their learning and knowledge. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) demonstrated that an educational environment that stresses staff-student interactions, encourages students to participate in the life of the college, involves students in classroom discussions and is concerned about the academic growth and development of students results in student persistence, degree completion and the development of critical thinking skills, analytical competencies, and intellectual development:

Other things being equal, the strongest evidence indicated that the greater the student's engagement in academic work or in the academic experience of the college, the greater his or her level of knowledge acquisition and general cognitive growth...academic engagement reduced authoritarianism and dogmatism and increased autonomy and independence, intellectual orientation, and the use of principled moral reasoning (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005, p. 608).

Despite this body of knowledge that engagement positively impacts on students, there is a lack of evidence within the Irish higher education system on the extent to which students are engaging with academic life and the degree to which they interact with staff. It is proposed that the introduction of the INSS will address this shortfall. As highlighted by Coates (2008, p. 7), student engagement surveys, such as the INSS, can provide:

evidence about what students are actually doing, highlights the most critical aspects of learning and development, provides a 'learner-centred, whole-of-institution' perspective, and gives an index of students' involvement in study.

It is also proposed that the results from the INSS will be used to inform academic staff of the extent to which students are engaging with higher education at national, institutional and disciplinary levels. This, as Coates (2008) emphasises, can demonstrate to academic staff how levels of student engagement are related to student outcomes. In addition, it facilitates staff to understand the academic practices that facilitate students to engage with their program of studies and college life. The results from the engagement survey can enhance and develop a debate about student engagement (Coates, 2008). This debate has already commenced with a number of conferences being developed around the theme of student engagement. The national reach of the INSS will be central in further developing the debate that is beginning to emerge in the Irish higher education system on the student experience.

In addition to measuring students' involvement in college life, it is proposed that the INSS will be used to identify the impact of initiatives directed at the student experience and student engagement put in place at both institutional and national levels. At the institutional level, there has been exponential growth in the development of centres for teaching and learning, the appointment academics to senior positions within the institutes of technology and university sectors with a teaching and learning remit and the development of modules

to encourage students to engage with academic study and the life of the campus (see, for example, the *First 7 Weeks* program at the University of Limerick at www3.ul.ie/ctl/first-seven-weeks). In addition, institutions within the higher education sector are increasingly offering postgraduate programs that facilitate academic staff to achieve formalised qualifications in teaching and learning in higher education.

In the further development of the scholarship and teaching and learning in the higher education system in Ireland, national innovations have been put in place to enhance the quality of the learning experience for students. Initiatives include the *Learning Innovation Network* (www.lin.ie) to enhance teaching and learning in the institute of technology sector and the *National Academy for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning* (www.nairtl.ie), which facilitates the development of research-based teaching and learning practices to enhance the student experience at undergraduate and graduate levels. Recently, the *National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning at Third Level* has been announced and will act as an umbrella organisation for many of the bodies involved in innovation and quality improvement in teaching and learning.

The INSS is coming at a time when the importance of a quality teaching and learning experience is being internalised into the higher education system in Ireland. At both national and institutional levels, formal supports are in place to facilitate staff to use evidence-based innovations in their teaching and assessment. The INSS will be used to enhance the interventions and innovations developed by institutes of technology and universities as well as informing policy and strategy developed by national organisations.

International benchmarking

One of the reasons for basing the INSS on both the NSSE and the AUSSE is that it will allow for international comparisons (the items and scales in the INSS are comparable to both the NSSE and AUSSE). In particular, the Australian and New Zealand higher edu-

cation sectors have many similarities to the system in Ireland. This will provide comparative data on which to report benchmarks including: academic challenge, active learning, staff-student interactions, enriching educational experiences and supportive learning environment.

In addition, basing the INSS on the NSSE and AUSSE provides the opportunity to build networks with higher education systems in the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, China and other countries with national student surveys based on the NSSE. As Coates (2008) highlights, the international focus of the debate on student engagement will enable the Irish higher education system to engage in debates and conversations with the higher education systems in a number of countries on methods, analysis, effective interventions and outcomes.

Inform research on the Irish higher education system

The data from the INSS will be of great interest to researchers working in the field of higher education. There has been a long history of research on student engagement in the United States based on the results of the NSSE. In addition research is beginning to emerge in the Australian and New Zealand systems based on the outcomes of the AUSSE.

There is an emerging scholarship in higher education in Ireland, most notably the seminal work on equity in accessing higher education (Clancy, 1996; 1997; 2003), and policy in higher education (Hazelkorn, 2008). However, with some exceptions, there has been a paucity of research into the student experience of higher education in Ireland. The INSS will allow this current gap in higher education research in Ireland to be filled. In addition, the INSS will allow for research on the student, institutional and disciplinary factors that relate to student engagement be ascertained - another area in which there has been little or no research emanating from the Irish higher education system.

Enhancement of collaboration among stakeholders

The project to develop the INSS was unique in that its development involved the collaboration of key stakeholders from the higher education sector in Ireland, including representatives from institutes of technology, universities, student representative bodies and quality assurance agencies. This collaborative approach facilitated the successful development of the survey and provides a platform in which to undertake further initiatives and research on the student experience within all sectors of higher education in Ireland.

It is also proposed that the data from the INSS will also be used to start a debate at disciplinary, institutional and national levels on student experience. As Coates (2008, p. 17) states “information about student engagement plays a valuable role in enhancing the quality of higher education, if only by stimulating conversations about how students engage in high-quality learning”. The results from the INSS will help inform the strategy and outcomes of initiatives put in place by these national and institutional bodies, the focus of which is to enhance the student experience and the enhancement of teaching and learning practices that will positively impact on student outcomes.

Collaboration amongst institutions and sectors will also be enhanced through the standardisation of the INSS. To date, universities and institutes of technology in Ireland have been using a variety of measures of student outcomes. However, very little has been published on the methods and approaches put in place by institutions to measure the student experience, student outcomes or student engagement. The development of the INSS, for the first time, provides the higher education sectors in Ireland with a psychometrically sound measure of a number of student outcomes. With the instrument, based on the NSSE and AUSSE, universities and institutes of technology can “confidently evaluate the extent to which their students engage in different activities and the extent to which new policy affected student engagement” (Carle *et al.*, 2009, p. 776).

Implementing and responding to policy on quality

It is proposed that the INSS will be used to identify areas for improvement in the Irish higher education system. However, it is acknowledged that there are limitations to the extent to which a measure of student engagement can capture all elements of the student experience (Hagel *et al.*, 2012). Nonetheless, building on the work undertaken on the NSSE and AUSSE, the results from the INSS can be used to enhance the quality of higher education in Ireland.

Policy documents recently published on the higher education system in Ireland have, along with identifying the importance of evaluating the student experience of teaching and research, highlighted the benefits of facilitating students to engage in the academic and social life of the college. This assertion is based on the substantial body of evidence that demonstrates that “individual student engagement in educationally purposive activities leads to ... favourable educational outcomes” (Trowler and Trowler, 2010, p. 14). The increasing recognition of the importance of student engagement is to ensure that students benefit personally, professionally and academically from their time in higher education (HEA, 2013).

The INSS, responding to a number of policy documents on quality at the European level that have emerged as a consequence of the Bologna process, can be used to identify the value of the student experience and identify targeted interventions that can be implemented to improve the quality of higher education experienced by students. The proposed longitudinal nature of data collection (it is proposed that the INSS will be administered following each academic year in Ireland) will also allow for trends in student outcomes to be measured and the quality of the student experience to be ascertained over time. As Coates (2008) states the use of a student engagement measure is a “new approach to measuring higher education quality”- the student engagement measure puts in place an approach to ascertaining a component of measuring quality in the Irish higher education system that was heretofore missing. In addition, recent European communiqués and reports that have emerged from the Bologna pro-

cess including London Communiqué (2007), Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve (2009) and European Association for Quality in Higher Education (2009) have continued the call for student involvement in the quality assurance process. In the report *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (European Association for Quality in Higher Education, 2009), it was recommended that higher education institutions should monitor the progress, satisfaction levels and outcomes of students. In addition, the report highlights the importance of support services in ensuring students experience a high quality learning environment. A EUA report on *Tracking Learners' and Graduates' Progression Paths* (2012) also explores how effective student feedback and tracking mechanisms can contribute to enhanced institutional decision-making, including the development of student services and improved quality assurance processes.

The INSS goes some way to fulfilling these national and European recommendations, especially on the growing centrality surrounding the debate on the effectiveness of student engagement. The implementation of the INSS, as recommended in a number of policy documents, not least the recommendation in the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011) would allow students to be involved in the evaluative and quality process and the results from student feedback to be used to inform policy at local and national levels.

Provide students with a voice

The development and implementation of the INSS will provide students with a voice in ascertaining the quality of their educational experience. The previous lack of input from students in the evaluative process was emphasised by the European Universities Association (2005a) review as being a particular weakness of the quality assurance procedures in the higher education sector in Ireland:

This lack of student involvement was surprising to the EUA teams, all the more so since very few systematic

student feedback mechanisms appeared to be in place to ensure that departments had regular and clear information from students regarding the quality of teaching and of the learning environment. The EUA teams were unanimously surprised to find that students have almost no formal input into monitoring or evaluating the quality of teaching and learning in Irish universities (EUA 2005a, p. 22).

The EUA identified that where student feedback was obtained, it was found to be on an *ad hoc* basis, with little or no evidence available on how the findings from such feedback were used, assimilated or acted upon. The EUA (2005a), recognising the importance of student involvement in evaluative processes, recommended that “as a basic minimum, the Irish universities need to ensure coherent and regular student feedback on all courses and modules, and for this feedback to be an explicit input to the QA process” (p. 22).

The advent of the INSS addresses the concerns of higher education academics and policy makers that students be given a voice in the evaluative process. In addition, the importance of student involvement was recognised in involving the student body in the development and testing of the instrument from the very start of the process. This consisted of student representation through the Union of Students in Ireland on the INSS planning committees as well as undertaking a series of focus groups in the institute of technology and university sectors to ascertain the views of a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate students on the usability and merit of the INSS.

It is recognised, however, that involving students in measuring their levels of engagement is not enough. There is a need to close the feedback loop. There is a need to ensure that students are informed of the results of the INSS, what improvements are taking place, to elicit their views on both the feedback process and the developments that occur as a consequence of the results from the survey. Involving students in the feedback process will increase the likelihood of students providing feedback in the future as well as demonstrating the

value of their input in the process.

Conclusion

The quality agenda and the exponential increase in the numbers of school leavers and mature-aged students entering higher education in Ireland has led to a need to evaluate and understand the quality of the experience of students attending an increasingly diverse and rapidly changing sector. To understand how this changing system is impacting on both the standard of education delivered and the experience of students, there was a need to identify a measure that provided students with a voice in the quality process. To this end, the INSS based on the NSSE and the AUSSE, using a collaborative approach involving key stakeholders in the Irish higher education system, was developed.

The INSS will provide for the first time in Ireland empirical data on the extent to which students are engaging with the academic life of their higher education institutions. The results will be used to identify strategies that can enhance academic challenge, staff and student interactions, develop enriching educational experiences, and develop supportive learning environments. This evidence can also be used to inform strategy and policy for national bodies charged with enhancing the quality of the student experience and the delivery of teaching and learning practices within the different higher education sectors.

The approach to development of the INSS outlined in this chapter highlights the increasing trend in international higher education over the last decade to use student self-reports in evaluation, especially in the measurement of student engagement and student satisfaction. Furthermore, basing the development of the Irish National Student Survey on a well-validated, self-report of student engagement is in line with the recommendation from a number of reports and policy documents, that students be given a voice in evaluating their experience of higher education.

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