



## StudentSurvey.ie Framework and Terms of Engagement July 2025

### StudentSurvey.ie Framework

#### 1. Introduction

The StudentSurvey.ie initiative originated in 2012 as a response to *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. The Strategy included recommendations relating to the development and implementation of a national survey of students. The Strategy stated 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”*

and 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”.*

The National Strategy continued 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.”*

More recently, the HEA Act 2022 (Section 45) provides a legislative basis for undertaking surveys of student engagement.

*45. (1) An tÚdarás shall undertake, or cause to be undertaken, in co-operation with representatives of students, national representatives of designated institutions of higher education, designated institutions of higher education and the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Authority of Ireland surveys of students which shall—*

*(a) be undertaken at regular intervals and, in any event, not less frequently than once every 2 years,*

*(b) be undertaken in respect of undergraduate students and postgraduate students,*

*(c) collect information for the purpose of documenting student engagement in higher education identifying good practice and any challenges arising,*

*(d) collect information for the purpose of enhancing student engagement, teaching, learning and assessment at a local level and a national level,*

*(e) collect information on student opinion on important issues of higher education practice and policy at a local level and a national level, and*

*(f) collect information on such other matters as may be agreed from time to time by An tÚdarás, representatives of students, national representatives of designated institutions of higher education and the Qualifications and Quality Assurance Authority of Ireland, following consultation with the Minister.*

A national collaborative partnership was put in place in late 2012 to address the National Strategy recommendation and consisted of state agencies, participating institutions and their

representative bodies, and Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn (AMLÉ). StudentSurvey.ie is co-sponsored by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Technological University Association (TUA) and AMLÉ.

The national steering group, the StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group, is supported by specific working groups to consider particular issues.

## **2. Development and revisions**

The US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was identified as an appropriate initial reference point for an Irish national survey. At the time, NSSE operated in the US and Canada with derivative surveys in use in multiple other countries, including the UK. Given this methodological coherence, a national pilot survey was implemented in 2013 for first year undergraduates, final year undergraduates and postgraduate students on taught programmes. The pilot has been followed by national surveys annually thereafter.

In 2018, a national pilot survey for postgraduate research students was developed and implemented as an additional element of the overall StudentSurvey.ie initiative. This reflects an early commitment to include the experiences of these students in the development of national student survey(s), given that pre-testing of the original question set used to develop the 2013 pilot identified the need for specific questions to reflect the experiences of research students.

In 2022, the survey entered a period of Strategic Reflection and Review. The review process aimed to deepen understanding of student engagement within the context of a rapidly evolving higher education landscape. To achieve this, current trends were examined, challenges, and opportunities, leading to the commissioning of two reports—the Mi:Lab report and the Crowe report—to provide actionable insights and inform the redesign of StudentSurvey.ie.

The Mi:Lab report examined the day-to-day operations of the survey within institutions, identifying key challenges faced during implementation. The Crowe report engaged senior management and recognized StudentSurvey.ie as a well-established tool for capturing the student experience in teaching and learning within the Irish higher education sector. However, it also highlighted challenges related to the survey instrument, governance, strategic objectives, and the impact of survey outcomes.

Informed by these reports and extensive feedback from stakeholders, the Steering Group decided to postpone fieldwork in 2024, opting instead to conduct a comprehensive review of the survey instrument. This review sought to reaffirm the pivotal role of the student voice in enhancing higher education experiences.

A revised taught survey was put in place for 2026, following an 18-month review process carried out by a StudentSurvey.ie Review Working Group.

A review of the timing of the taught survey and the cohort for inclusion is currently underway.

## **3. Purpose, Principles and Objectives**

Development and implementation of StudentSurvey.ie is driven by an agenda of quality enhancement i.e. to encourage exploration data within institutions, in the context of data from similar institutions and nationally, in order to inform discussion and planning to improve the experiences of students. The comprehensive nature of StudentSurvey.ie is regarded as a key strength as it enables utilisation of the data by various organisational units and to serve differing

perspectives. These include, but are not limited to, enhancement of teaching and learning, quality assurance, review of student support services, and experiences of international students. The enhancement focus is an intrinsic part of the initiative and project partners do not support the use of student engagement results for any overly simplistic purpose that could be perceived as ranking institutions. Project partners, including the HEA and QQI, fully support the enhancement focus and take care to utilise data in a manner that supports this objective. For example, the StudentSurvey.ie partnership determines what data may be made publicly available.

The StudentSurvey.ie initiative is underpinned by a number of key principles which include:

- The explicit aspiration to support and inform enhancement of the experiences of students;
- Meaningful benefits at institutional level to staff and to students;
- Transparency of implementation whilst guaranteeing student confidentiality;
- Minimisation of any additional workload at institutional level and, thereby, to facilitate increased focus on promotion of participation and interpretation of resulting data;
- Effective communication of the overall initiative via the StudentSurvey.ie Team, noting that there are also complementary bilateral interactions between individual institutions and the survey contractor;
- Alignment with the higher education System Performance Framework;

The overall objectives of StudentSurvey.ie are identified as:

- To increase transparency in relation to the student experience of and engagement with higher education;
- To enable direct student input in expressing their experience and engagement with their higher education institution;
- To ensure that the student voice is heard and acknowledged, with an ongoing partnership to ensure impact from the survey findings, between individual higher education institutions and students' unions;
- To facilitate higher education institutions' efforts to reflect that engagement and those experiences in their policy and practice in an impactful way;
- To help institutions identify areas of strength in how students engage, so they can continue and strengthen these practices;
- To help institutions identify areas requiring further development or improvement in how students engage so they can respond;
- To serve as a guide for continual enhancement of institutions' teaching and learning and student engagement;
- To facilitate comparison with other higher education systems nationally, sectorally and internationally.

#### **4. Governance and management**

Governance and management structures for StudentSurvey.ie have been designed to ensure wide representation of participating higher education institutions and other partners. The StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group consists of representatives from universities, the technological sector Quality and Qualifications Ireland and the project co-sponsors (HEA, IUA, TUA, AMLÉ). Representative bodies are periodically offered the opportunity to refresh group membership and not all participating institutions are members of the group.

The StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group is responsible for strategic oversight of the national student survey initiative. The objectives of the group are:

The objectives of the StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group are:

- i. To maintain a strategic overview of implementation of the national survey of student engagement
- ii. To facilitate effective implementation by delegating activities to project working groups as appropriate; by reviewing activities of these groups; and by ensuring that best value principles are consistently applied
- iii. To determine the timing and nature of periodic review of the existing surveys in order to maximise the potential impact on enhancement of students' experiences of higher education, taking account of
  - a. a. best practice internationally
  - b. b. appropriate research methodologies and survey technologies.
- iv. To establish and embed a survey framework that facilitates institutions' implementation of the student survey, by informing and amending local policies and quality assurance procedures where appropriate
- v. To maintain an overview of an agreed communication and promotion strategy to increase awareness of the project and to encourage student participation
  - a. To ensure that key stakeholders within higher education, including institutional leaders, senior management, wider staff and student leaders, are informed of progress and outputs of the project
  - b. To ensure that wider relevant stakeholders (such as national agencies, specific interest groups) are aware of the implementation of the surveys, their outcomes and rationale; and where the data may be of relevance to their specific remits. To ensure that the content and structure of published report(s) support local, sectoral and national actions to enhance the experience of students in higher education.

This StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group is responsible for the overall strategic management of the project.

The StudentSurvey.ie Communications Group is responsible for providing guidance, oversight, and approvals for strategic communication planning to promote the survey and encourage student participation.

The StudentSurvey.ie Analysis and Impact Group to ensure data outputs are fit for purpose and address questions of institutional or national policy concern.

A Review Working Group was in place between 2004 and 2025 with the responsibility of responding to suggestions made in the two commissioned reports, as well as leading the redesign process to create an updated survey design.

Members of these groups are nominated by participating organisations. A full-time project manager and data analyst are assigned to the StudentSurvey.ie Team within the HEA to ensure coherence and consistency between the various elements of the project.

# **StudentSurvey.ie Terms of Engagement From 2026-**

**This document sets out the terms of engagement between the StudentSurvey.ie project and individual institutions participating in the survey.**

## **1. Resourcing**

StudentSurvey.ie is funded by the HEA, and operationally managed by the StudentSurvey.ie Team based in the HEA, as a shared service for institutions under its remit. There is no direct fee for participation for universities, the technological sector, or other identified institutions.

The survey administration is carried out by a third-party survey contractor, contracted by the StudentSurvey.ie project.

### **1.1 Participation and resourcing of other institutions**

StudentSurvey.ie Co-sponsors and the StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group have agreed, and reaffirmed in December 2024, that other institutions are welcome to participate once any additional direct costs (for example, additional survey contractor costs, additional promotional materials) are recovered on a cost neutral basis, and that project protocols are adhered to. These include validation of the data structure used to implement StudentSurvey.ie (see below – section 4).

To generate meaningful data, all such institutions are required to commit to multiple successive annual iterations of StudentSurvey.ie. In practice, this may align to the three-year cycle associated with StudentSurvey.ie project funding and, accordingly, the contract with the third-party survey administrator.

### **1.2. Additional costs**

Any costs associated with participation in meetings, organisation of promotional activities on campus, local procurement of additional promotional materials, or inclusion of additional cohorts in fieldwork remain the responsibility of the institution in question.

## **2. Deliverables to institutions**

The following resources and support will be provided by the StudentSurvey.ie Team, and at times the survey contractor, to institutions:

- Delivery of online survey to identified student cohorts with named individual contact staff (provided by the survey contractor);
- Online monitoring of anonymous response rates during fieldwork (provided by the survey contractor);
- Return of institution-level data in structured files enabling analysis in the context of all participating institutions nationally (provided by the survey contractor);
- Physical and electronic promotional materials (quantities based on institution size), which are subject to annual review of effectiveness and value for money;
- A social media campaign during field work to promote the survey;
- Production of an annual national report by the StudentSurvey.ie Team along with associated further data analyses;
- Support from StudentSurvey.ie Team for bespoke presentation / testing of data and facilitation of institution-specific workshops / discussions.

### **3. Promotion of the survey**

#### **3.1 Promotional materials**

The StudentSurvey.ie project provides a range of branded promotional materials and incentives to promote participation by students in the survey and as a result obtain strong response rates. The nature and scale of these materials and incentives remains under regular review by the StudentSurvey.ie Team, and the StudentSurvey.ie Communications Group, to ensure the effectiveness of the approach and value for money for the project.

Institutions may offer additional incentives which are agreed at local level. The most influential factor in a decision to offer additional incentives is whether incentives are commonly used on campus for other initiatives. The cost of any additional incentives is borne by individual institutions.

The greatest encouragement for students to take part in StudentSurvey.ie is for staff to demonstrate the value of the survey and use the resulting data to prompt enhancement of the experiences of students.

#### **3.2 Social media campaign**

An efficient method of promoting and increasing awareness of the survey is through a creative agency-managed social media campaign. There are numerous channels used including TikTok, LinkedIn, Meta and Google, amongst others. This strategy has been used for many iterations of the survey with a post-campaign report provided by the contracted creative agency, which is reviewed by the StudentSurvey.ie Communications Group.

### **4. Logistical timeline for implementation of the StudentSurvey.ie**

The StudentSurvey.ie Team will communicate key milestones and deadlines with nominated contact points for the survey beginning in Q3 of the year before the survey fieldwork takes place. This ensures alignment between institutions, student representatives, the StudentSurvey.ie Team and the survey contractor which collects the data.

Therefore, institutions should ensure that the StudentSurvey.ie Team has up-to-date contact details of all relevant staff who are responsible for StudentSurvey.ie. The StudentSurvey.ie team will be in contact with HEIs to update contact lists, and otherwise contact details can be updated by emailing [info@studentsurvey.ie](mailto:info@studentsurvey.ie).

The following general sequencing of the process is as follows:

#### **Data collection**

- Institutions ensure that StudentSurvey.ie is explicitly referenced in data collection notices made available to students on registration;
- Institutions review student record systems to prepare for submission of specified basic non-sensitive demographic data to survey contractor, including academic unit fields where possible. Institutions taking part in StudentSurvey.ie for the first time are required to submit sample data to the StudentSurvey.ie Team significantly in advance of submission to the survey contractor in order to ensure that the data are structured according to submissions to the HEA Student Record System (SRS);
- Institutions securely submit defined non-sensitive demographic data for target cohorts to the survey contractor;

- Data is collected by the contractor, with national data returned to the HEA, and institutional data returned to HEIs;
- Institutional data is returned to approximately three to four months after fieldwork, enabling some (limited) feedback to students during the same academic year and facilitating initial analysis in advance of the next academic year.

#### **Determination of Fieldwork window**

- Institutions review academic calendars and consult with staff and students' representatives to identify the most appropriate three-week period for local fieldwork within the national fieldwork window of 1 February to 31 March. Where possible, fieldwork should include week six of semester two to 'anchor' the survey;
- Institutions establish a local implementation team to plan and manage StudentSurvey.ie implementation, promotion and monitoring of anonymous response rates;

#### **Preparation for fieldwork**

- Survey contractor issues StudentSurvey.ie Handbook to key institutional contacts (as above HEIs should ensure that up to date contact details have been provided to the StudentSurvey.ie Team);
- Institutions confirm signatories for template email invitations and any (limited) optional text that may enhance participation of their students;
- Institutions review test email invitations to identify any technical issues prior to fieldwork;
- The survey contractor opens fieldwork for each institution and sends individual email invitations to eligible students.

#### **Promotion**

- Hardcopy and electronic promotional materials are distributed to institutions by the StudentSurvey.ie Team in advance of fieldwork. Nominated contact points are in place in institutions to take delivery of promotional materials (as above HEIs should ensure that up to date contact details have been provided to the StudentSurvey.ie Team);
- A social media campaign is put in place by the StudentSurvey.ie Team for the duration of the fieldwork window.

#### **During fieldwork**

- Institutions promote participation and monitor anonymous response rates using an online portal which is updated daily;
- During fieldwork for each institution, the survey contractor sends up to two reminder emails to students who have not completed the survey or opted out.

### **5. Results from StudentSurvey.ie**

#### **5.1 National results**

A full report of the national survey results is published each year, usually in Quarter 4. The report structure is reviewed annually but has tended to follow an established format. The reports are published on the StudentSurvey.ie website.

The final draft of the national report is circulated to partners at the start of the academic year (well in advance of the final designed version) to enable discussion at Academic Councils and other relevant committees in advance of formal publication, thereby facilitating wider feedback and discussion to coincide with any increased awareness prompted by the launch of the national report.

National datasets are also lodged with the Irish Social Sciences Data Archive (ISSDA) following publication of the annual report. These datasets are anonymised at institutional level by removing institution codes and course codes. They are provided to facilitate research or teaching purposes.

## 5.2 Institution-level results

Participating institutions receive their own survey data in a number of files, after the conclusion of national fieldwork. These files are usually made available in Quarter 2. The files include some agreed analysis to facilitate interpretation of the data.

Some of the files provide results for the individual institution alongside data for all StudentSurvey.ie institutions.

A further file provides “cleaned” data for individual respondents. This file contributes to transparency of the analysis undertaken to generate the other files and allows for any additional bespoke analysis that may be of interest within institutions. Students are given a guarantee of confidentiality when invited to participate. Therefore, this file has been anonymised to the extent possible externally by replacing student ID with a proxy value, replacing date of birth with year of birth, and removing any names that may have been included in free text responses. Nevertheless, there remains some risk of identifying some students locally by combining demographic data (e.g., students with a particular profile in smaller cohorts) and, therefore, care is required before any circulation of this file within institutions. Interpretation of local data requires appreciation of the local context (at institution/ faculty/ department levels as appropriate). It is regarded as good practice to facilitate analysis, interpretation and discussion of such results by staff and students in order to plan for wider feedback and appropriate action.

A specific protocol is in place regarding the return of institution-level data, as follows:

- Institution-level survey data will be made available to Registrars’ offices and to the nominated institutional Gatekeeper(s)/ other institutional nominee(s).
- Registrars and the nominated institutional Gatekeeper(s)/ other institutional nominee(s) will share responsibility for any subsequent circulation of data relating to their own institution.
- Local data should be used only for internal purposes until after publication of the national report.
- Providing feedback to staff and to students is a key objective of the project and institutions are encouraged to do so, in context, using a range of methods such as inclusion on agendas of appropriate meetings, specific briefings and internal publications. This interpretation, feedback and discussion should begin after receipt of data and does not depend on publication of the national report. All references to results, for internal use initially and potential other uses after publication of the national report, should clearly state that the data originated from StudentSurvey.ie (the Irish Survey of Student Engagement) or PGR StudentSurvey.ie (the Irish Survey of Student Engagement for Postgraduate Research Students) as appropriate.

The timeline for return of anonymised results to individual institutions has been constructed to enable some limited feedback to students within the same academic year (perhaps similar to thanks for participating/ number or percentage of respondents/ one or two high level findings) as well as reference to the StudentSurvey.ie results at the start of the next academic year (e.g. “you will be asked to take part in the StudentSurvey.ie next Spring. Last year, X students took part and we are working on A, B ,C as a result”).

### 5.3 Purposes of institutional level data

A summary of results from each participating institution is published on the StudentSurvey.ie website, in order to support transparency of the initiative and to enhance appropriate uses of the data within the higher education sector. These files are made available publicly but are not actively promoted. The importance of the explicit enhancement focus was reiterated in relation to these data sets and a specific set of principles were developed and circulated to key contacts within participating institutions. These are provided to support enhancement and should not be used for comparative marketing.

In essence, when considering potential use/ reference of institution-level StudentSurvey.ie data:

- Institutions are welcome to use data from other institutions internally to better understand relative positives and relative negatives of their own data when considering enhancement activities and initiatives.
- Institutions are free to reference their own data when describing distinctive elements of the experiences of their students to their own communities of students and staff, or to third parties. Data should not be used for comparative marketing purposes e.g. “75% of students report.....” should **not** be accompanied by “...which is the best result of all [institution-type]”. Institutions are encouraged to reflect the comprehensive nature of the survey and not to focus on, for example, the final two questions which do not accurately reflect the breadth of student engagement
- Institutions should respect the data and avoid “cherry-picking” statistics that are not representative of their overall data. All institutions have areas of strength and aspects that merit further enhancement and StudentSurvey.ie is built to identify these for the benefit of students. The cumulative effect of individual institutions actively promoting only the most positive statistics may be to, inadvertently, contribute to the superficial comparisons which the collaborative partnership has been determined to avoid.
- Institutions should also be aware that institution-level data may also be produced by the HEA as part of System Performance Framework reporting on the HEA website.

## Application to participate in StudentSurvey.ie

### Declaration

1. On behalf of the institution named below, I agree to abide by the StudentSurvey.ie Terms of Reference as they are laid out above.
2. I agree to participate for a period of no less than 3 periods of fieldwork. I understand that this does not limit the right of the StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group to review the participation of any institution in the survey at any time.
3. I agree to being invoiced by the HEA for the cost of running the survey.
4. I agree to make a sample data return using mock data within the timeframes agreed, and I agree to this data return being reviewed by the StudentSurvey.ie Project Manager, the HEA and the current third-party survey company, to ensure it complies with technical requirements to run the survey.
5. I confirm that all students registering or re-registering in the institution will be shown a 'student collection notice' which will refer explicitly to StudentSurvey.ie, for as long as the institution participates in StudentSurvey.ie.

### Please outline your reasons for applying to join StudentSurvey.ie

Institution name	
Registrar name	
Registrar signature	
StudentSurvey.ie contact point name (if different from above)	
StudentSurvey.ie contact point signature	
Date	