



Report to



Exploration and Consultation Process on the
Governance and Impact of StudentSurvey.ie

October 2023



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Executive Summary

Crowe was commissioned by the Co-Sponsors and National Steering Group of StudentSurvey.ie to undertake an evaluation and review of the governance and impact of StudentSurvey.ie over the past ten years, and to make recommendations for its future implementation.

Our report concludes that StudentSurvey.ie is a well-established and effective vehicle for capturing the student experience of teaching and learning in the Irish higher education sector. However, there are significant challenges in relation to governance, defining strategic objectives, and impact that are limiting the development of StudentSurvey.ie. There is an increasing challenge in promoting engagement with the survey, an appreciation of its purpose and value across both institutions and students' unions. In order for StudentSurvey.ie to remain of relevant, these challenges must be addressed.

We recommend that:

- A significant effort goes into redefining and recommunicating StudentSurvey.ie's objectives and strategic direction;
- To bolster and support the effective governance and management of StudentSurvey.ie, responsibility for its administration should be transferred to the Higher Education Authority, while preserving the broad sectoral partnership model of engagement in steering the work of the initiative; and
- StudentSurvey.ie explore additional activities to increase the impact of the survey both locally in institutions and also nationally.

The intention is to expand upon the success that the survey has already achieved in effectively capturing the student experience while also navigating the challenges that the survey now faces in a sector that has rapidly changed within a short period of time.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background of Project

StudentSurvey.ie, formerly known as the Irish Survey of Student Engagement, arose from the recommendations of the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030: Report of the Strategy Group, January 2011 (the Hunt Report). Following a pilot initiative in 2013, it has become an integrated component of the higher education landscape and is intended to inform, support, and encourage enhancement discussion and activities at both an institutional level and national policy level.

StudentSurvey.ie is managed by a Steering Group consisting of representatives from its four co-sponsors, the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Irish Universities Association (IUA), Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), as well as Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and other sectoral representatives. The project manager for StudentSurvey.ie is based in THEA, who provides administrative facilities for the initiative.

Given the increased focus on student engagement in higher education, reflected recently in the provisions of the Higher Education Authority Act 2022, this review comes at an opportune time for the sector to consider the configuration of StudentSurvey.ie, particularly in how it can optimally achieve its objectives and ultimately drive enhancement of student engagement and of the overall student experience at both local and national levels over the coming years.

1.2 Terms of Reference

The “What’s Next for StudentSurvey.ie” report produced by the Maynooth Innovation Lab (the Mi:Lab Report) was commissioned in anticipation of the survey’s 10-year anniversary. Building on the findings of the report, this review was commissioned to deliver the following Terms of Reference, as set out in the RFQ documentation:

- Consultation and exploration to be delivered by an external consultant – reporting to the Co-Sponsors for oversight and to the Steering Committee;
- A key outcome of the process should include options on the configuration of managing the survey, analysing results, and engaging with key audiences beyond and within institutions. A core undertaking in this exploration is to set out a roadmap that ensures the provisions of the new HEA Act are met;
- Significant, but varied, uses of data within institutions should be better understood to inform the future of the survey;
- Interaction with national policy making fora, or other stakeholders is limited currently. StudentSurvey.ie links to national policy should be further explored;
- The detail of the exploration and consultation process will be finalised during preparatory discussions between Co-Sponsors and the consultant commissioned; and
- We note specifically that existing processes are in place for the periodic review of questions and frequency of fieldwork, and that these issues are not under consideration in the current exploration.

1.3 Conduct of the Review

1.3.1 Overview

The review was conducted between May and September 2023 and involved four broad sets of tasks:

- A review of relevant documentation and information relating to the funding programme;
- Gathering information relating to StudentSurvey.ie and its governance and impact through engagement with a range of stakeholders involved with the survey;
- Rigorous analysis of the information and data gathered through our review and an examination of the policy environment; and
- Development of interim and final reports.

1.3.2 Initiation

The purpose of this task was to formally initiate the project with the StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group (“the Steering Group”). During this task, our project team met with the Steering Group to agree the terms of reference and the overall approach to the assignment. The project initiation meeting involved agreeing the following key activities:

- Refinements to the proposed overall approach if required;
- Project organisation and reporting arrangements;
- Project timetable and relevant deadlines;
- Relevant documents/contacts that may help our research and analysis;
- Stakeholder map for stakeholder engagement; and
- Commercial arrangements for the project (i.e., timing of invoicing and payments, etc.).

We used the project initiation meeting as a forum to support the “context-setting” of this assignment, ensuring our team fully understood the Steering Group’s expectations for this assessment.

As an outcome of the project initiation meeting, we agreed a clear Terms of Reference for the remainder of our work on the project; this included draft stakeholder identification criteria, as well as clear parameters for what is within scope and achievable for the research overall, within the given timeline.

1.3.3 Desk-Based Review

This task comprised analysis of documentation and information collected in respect of StudentSurvey.ie. Our objective was to build a detailed picture of how the programme currently operates, including engagements with stakeholders and its governance structure.

We built upon the information referenced in the SRFT documentation and publicly available documentation, collecting relevant information about StudentSurvey.ie and the environment in which it operates, including:

- Mi:Lab Report;

- Relevant state policies and legislation relating to student feedback (e.g., Higher Education Authority Act 2022, quality assurance environment, the National Student Engagement Programme, etc.);
- Detailed information on the governance structure and linking relationships between the Project Manager and institutions (e.g., schedules of engagement, terms of reference); and
- Existing previous documentation related to StudentSurvey.ie – such as annual reports, surveys, and external feedback.

Conducting a thorough analysis of documentation and information available regarding StudentSurvey.ie allowed us to approach stakeholder engagements with a strong grounding in the as-is picture of the programme, and with having identified any particular gaps or areas of interest for different stakeholders. It also helped us to frame our analysis of findings, development of recommendations, and reporting in the final stages of the assignment.

1.3.4 Stakeholder Engagement

Throughout this task we employed a variety of stakeholder engagement methodologies to gather information from stakeholders to inform the exploration and consultation process. Stakeholder engagement allows us to gather rich and nuanced qualitative data to clarify, bolster, or triangulate the evidence generated during other tasks.

All institutions and Students' Unions which are involved in StudentSurvey.ie were invited to engage in this process. A list of the institutions and Students' Unions that participated in the process are included in Appendix 1.

The key stakeholders and the type of engagement included:

| Stakeholder | Engagement |
|--|--|
| Incoming Students' Union Officers | Focus groups with a number of representatives. |
| Outgoing Students' Union Officers | Focus groups with a number of representatives. |
| Institutional Leads | Focus groups with a number of representatives. |
| Registrars | Focus groups with a number of representatives. |
| StudentSurvey.ie Subgroup Members | Focus groups with a number of representatives. |
| StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group | One-to-one interviews with members of the Steering Group. |
| StudentSurvey.ie Co-Sponsors | One-to-one interviews with representatives of the Co-Sponsors. |

1.3.5 Findings and Recommendations

The purpose of this task was to triangulate our findings from previous tasks and to produce evidence-informed recommendations for the project co-sponsors and the StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group.

Having generated a significant volume of data and information through primary (stakeholder engagement) and secondary (desk-based) research, this task involved drawing all of this information together and conducting a rounded analysis of the data broken down by three themes; Objectives, Governance and Impact.

1.3.6 Reporting

Throughout the project, we maintained communication with the StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group and Co-Sponsors. This allowed us to keep them updated on our progress and our emerging findings. This ensures both a “no-surprises” approach to the assignment and that the Steering Group are kept informed and are aware of the recommendations before being presented with the final report.

2 Current Position

The Hunt Report recommended that higher education institutions put in place systems to capture feedback from students to inform institutional and programme management, as well as national policy. It also recommended that every higher education institution put in place a comprehensive anonymous student feedback system, coupled with structures to ensure that action is taken promptly in relation to student concerns. This recommendation was informed by legislation (namely, reference to the involvement of students in evaluating the quality of their educational experience in the Universities Act, 1997, and the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999) and other key policy drivers, such as “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area” and “Common Principles for Student Involvement in Quality Assurance/Quality Enhancement”). The Hunt report noted in 2011 that “substantial progress (in this area) has been made” but also stated that “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.”

In 2012, a national project structure was established, which was representative of higher education institutions and relevant organisations, including the Union of Students in Ireland. This project team implemented a pilot national student survey called the Irish Survey of Student Engagement in 2013, involving all universities, institutes of technology, and most colleges of education. The national pilot was regarded as successful, leading to an agreement to proceed to full implementation from 2014 onwards. A full report on implementation of the 2013 national pilot and other resources and results from subsequent years’ implementation are published on www.studentsurvey.ie.

A significant development was achieved in 2018 with the pilot Irish Survey of Student Engagement for Postgraduate Research Students. This discrete set of questions was offered to the body of students enrolled in programmes leading to postgraduate research degrees. The questions draw extensively from the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) used in the UK. The StudentSurvey.ie Postgraduate Research (PGR) Working Group continues to oversee the implementation of the survey.

The Irish Survey of Student Engagement and the Irish Survey of Student Engagement for Postgraduate Research Students were rebranded in 2019 and are now known as StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie respectively. Implementation of StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie is funded by the HEA, as a shared service for participating institutions. The project is co-sponsored by the HEA, IUA, THEA, and USI.

A representative national Steering Group maintains strategic direction for the project. In 2019, this group was reduced in number and the primary focus on strategic direction re-affirmed. It now consists of a representative of each of the co-sponsoring organisations, two representatives from the university sector, two representatives from the technological higher education sector, one representative from Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and the StudentSurvey.ie Project Manager. The group is called the StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group. In addition, there are a number of groups addressing specific elements of the project. A full-time StudentSurvey.ie Project Manager leads developments and ensures coherence and consistency between the various elements of the project. Furthermore, the Steering Group ensure that the survey instrument is reviewed every 5 years.



Chart 2.1: *The current governance and oversight structure of StudentSurvey.ie.*

While the survey has been rolled out and promoted successfully over the past decade, with consistent student engagement in providing responses, there has been a growing dissatisfaction from students over the use and implementation of the survey’s findings. This has been most notable with one Students’ Union passing a mandate to boycott the survey in the coming academic year and to divert efforts and resources towards running a campaign encouraging students to not respond to the survey. It is also worth highlighting that a similar approach is being considered by students and Students’ Unions in other institutions. Furthermore, similar concerns are also expressed from staff in institutions as well as an increased level of disengagement with the survey. This potential disengagement has considerable consequences for the future of StudentSurvey.ie and its impact across the sector.

3 Desk Research

3.1 Overview

As part of our desk research for this project we examined reports and policies, including the Higher Education Authority Act 2022.

One of the most important documents in this review was the Mi:Lab report, which used design-thinking workshops and a pre-workshop survey with a number of stakeholders related to the survey to gain detailed insights into their perceptions of the future of StudentSurvey.ie. As noted earlier, the Steering Group had commissioned Mi:Lab to undertake a consultation exercise which has acted as a precursor for the current Exploration & Consultation activity.

3.2 Mi:Lab Report

In anticipation of the survey's 10-year anniversary, and as part of their future planning for this nationally funded project, the StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group and the key working groups requested Mi:Lab to investigate the following questions related to the future of StudentSurvey.ie:

- What is next for StudentSurvey.ie in terms of achieving impact?
- How does the Higher Education Authority recognise “excellence” in this space?
- Is StudentSurvey.ie working for your institution?

This report made a number of findings that we have built upon during our evaluation of the survey. These findings were distilled into three main insights, which included:

- The voice of the students is essential to the creation of StudentSurvey.ie data. However, there exists a preoccupation within the higher education community with proving to the student population that “something is being done” as a result of the data collected through the survey. This preoccupation, along with the branding and communication style, alienates the true audience of StudentSurvey.ie – policy makers and decision makers.
- Higher Education Institution (HEI) staff and Students' Unions are responsible for driving the promotion and uptake of StudentSurvey.ie in their individual institutions. These staff are tired of StudentSurvey.ie, feeling that their “goodwill” towards the project is running out. So much time is spent on data collection and analysis that staff feel like they are caught in an endless cycle of “fieldwork and reporting.”
- Some participants in a workshop group expressed the opinion that “The survey is too long and the questions are too complicated.” The length of the survey and complexity of the questions are the targets for most of the blame for difficulty in recruiting students to participate. The report also speculated that a potential knock-on effect of this is that decision makers view the sample size as too small, and the data as non-representative, leading to inaction.

The report concluded by considering the next steps for the planning and future of StudentSurvey.ie. The immediate action that the report suggested was for StudentSurvey.ie to prioritise responses and activities around the following questions:

- “How Might We make StudentSurvey.ie the ‘Holy Grail’ for every Higher Education decision maker in Ireland?”
- “How Might We build teams of people within each Higher Education Institution impassioned by StudentSurvey.ie’s new aspiration to lead its delivery?”
- “How Might We ‘lean into’ the rigorous nature of the survey questions in the promotion of this data to Higher Education decision makers?”

This report begins to ask important questions for consideration around the future of StudentSurvey.ie in the Irish higher education landscape. The questions above regarding the future of the survey were used to ground our thinking as well as to direct our consultations with stakeholder groups throughout the stakeholder engagement aspect of our assignment.

4 Objectives

4.1 Overview

StudentSurvey.ie was initially piloted in 2013 as the Irish Survey of Student Engagement. The survey was created to allow students across the country the opportunity to comment upon their experiences of teaching and learning in Irish higher education. Furthermore, the survey was designed to allow for comparison of the student learning experience across other higher education systems nationally and internationally. However, from our analysis it became apparent that there is a lack of understanding of the purpose and objectives of the survey in the key parts of the Irish higher education sector today.

4.2 Key Findings

We observed commentary from stakeholders about the purpose of the survey. A common sentiment that arose during the consultations was uncertainty surrounding the objectives of the survey.

Many stakeholders were uncertain if the objectives today are the same as they were when the survey launched 10 years ago. If this lack of clarity is left unaddressed, it could potentially undermine the survey's effectiveness. If the key drivers of the survey at the institutional level are unclear of its intended use, this may lead to disengagement and a negative effect on participation.

We noted that the higher education sector is a rapidly evolving landscape. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, modes of teaching and learning have changed significantly. While particularly in relation to teaching and learning, the overall student experience is also affected. The manner in which students are interacting with their institutions is shifting, and therefore, this effect should be considered in the future planning of StudentSurvey.ie.

There is a gap in gathering feedback that focuses other factors that affect the learning experience and environment for students'. According to the Higher Education Authority Act 2022, surveys should collect information on what students consider to be important issues in higher education, both locally and nationally. Feedback suggested that it should cover a wide range of student-related issues, like accommodation, transportation, mental well-being, and other significant elements that have a fundamental impact on the student experience.

Another point that was frequently raised by stakeholders related to how survey data from the past decade can be strategically utilised to address educational challenges today. The exact way in which this data can be utilised to tackle overarching issues in the education sector remains somewhat uncertain. It is important for StudentSurvey.ie to provide clarity on how institutions, collectively, can harness this data at a national level, in order to shape strategies and policies that truly enhance the quality and effectiveness of higher education. StudentSurvey.ie could play a central role in providing direction and empowering institutions to address national issues using the survey data.

Collectively, these insights shed light on key areas that warrant close attention and potential reviewing. Realigning the survey's objectives, fostering a more student-centric approach, and enhancing transparency in the utilisation of data are important steps toward ensuring the

survey's continued relevance and impact in addressing pertinent issues within the realm of higher education.

Finally, we observed that StudentSurvey.ie lacks a well-defined strategic plan and a clear vision for the future. Development of a strategic plan and a launch event for the strategy would allow for a broad understanding of the future of the survey's objectives, in addition to re-engaging senior leadership within institutions with the clear purpose of the survey in the higher education landscape.

Recommendation 1: It is recommended that the Co-Sponsors of StudentSurvey.ie develop a clear and ambitious strategy and action plan for the next three years of the survey. This will include a plan for the implementation of the recommendations of this report and a vision for the survey's influence on the higher education sector going forward.

Recommendation 2: It is recommended that the Co-Sponsors of StudentSurvey.ie review and clearly define the objectives of the survey and communicate these to all stakeholders. These objectives should include the survey's purpose, how the data from the survey will be used, how the feedback loop will be closed, and how the survey findings will be communicated to all stakeholders.

5 Governance

5.1 Overview

We examined the governance and operation of the survey since the pilot initiative was launched in 2013. This assessed the strategic position of the survey within the higher education sector and the influence the survey data can have on making strategic decisions, both nationally and in local institutions.

5.2 Key Findings

We have identified key findings under the theme of Governance through a process of engaging with stakeholders and conducting desk-based research.

One notable finding included the need to enhance the strategic significance of StudentSurvey.ie within institutions. During our stakeholder engagements, we noticed that the survey was being promoted and the data analysed on an annual basis; however, following this there was limited use of the data to implement change beyond the annual cycle. Stakeholders offered various interpretations for the data's lack of use. This ranged for limited time to consider the data before the next iteration of the survey to low response rates in the institutions themselves.

However, it became apparent that many of the HEIs do not appear to consider the survey to be strategically significant. This can be summarised as a perception that the data and their use do not support the delivery of the individual HEI strategic intent. The strategic significance that the survey should hold for the HEIs involved is integral to StudentSurvey.ie's success. Additionally, the survey's alignment with the objectives and visions of these institutions stands as a crucial factor in ensuring its effectiveness and long-term impact.

It was also noted that from a governance and management perspective the current arrangement (hosting provided by THEA, and strategic oversight by the co-sponsors) is somewhat out of step with the requirements of the survey in terms of resourcing, and integration with other policy instruments for the higher education sector.

In order to amplify its national impact and alignment with institutional goals and national policy objectives, we recommend that responsibility for the governance and management of StudentSurvey.ie be transferred to the HEA. In terms of governance, integrating within the HEA would provide enhanced operational structure and support to the survey (say in respect of collaboration with HEA's Statistics Unit).

In relocating StudentSurvey.ie to the HEA, it is critical that the cooperative and broadly scoped oversight arrangements (specifically the Co-Sponsors and the Steering Group) are maintained. This will ensure the existing partnerships' continued input into the survey's strategic direction. This group should maintain representation from the HEA, IUA, THEA, USI, the university sector, the technological higher education sector, QQI, and the StudentSurvey.ie Project Manager. Retaining the Steering Group oversight structure will maintain the spirit of partnership addressed in the Higher Education Authority Act 2022 and allows for cross-sector input.

The positioning of StudentSurvey.ie within the broader context of national policies was also considered. Currently, it appears somewhat isolated at this level. To enhance its potential for generating a national impact, StudentSurvey.ie must create stronger ties with broader initiatives in the area of higher education. By strategically integrating StudentSurvey.ie into these larger initiatives, we feel that the scope for the survey to promote positive change on a national scale will be increased. For example, the prospect of integrating the survey into existing initiatives led by the HEA, QQI, and other influential policy drivers should be considered. This would include formally integrating the use of survey data into the institutions' Annual Quality Reports. This integration could contribute to a broader and more cohesive approach to higher education assessment and policy enhancement.

The movement of StudentSurvey.ie to the HEA and the implications for the governance of the survey should be included in a project plan for the future strategy that should be developed. This should include timelines for this movement and how this will be communicated to all the relevant stakeholders. It should further be considered that once this relocation is complete, StudentSurvey.ie must undertake a review process to ensure that the survey and its mission are fit for purpose. This process should be incorporated into the review process of the questions and survey system, which currently takes place on a regular basis by StudentSurvey.ie already. The last review of questions occurred in 2021.

Recommendation 3: It is recommended that, to enhance the strategic value and benefits of the survey, responsibility for StudentSurvey.ie should be transferred to the Higher Education Authority while maintaining the Co-Sponsors Steering Group structure to ensure input from across the higher education sector. This move would enable greater national influence and impact while making the survey strategically relevant to institutions.

6 Impact

6.1 Overview

The findings of our analysis indicate that there has been some notable impact across institutions as a result of StudentSurvey.ie. This impact is most prevalent in changes that have been made to improve the student experience based on data and findings of the survey. However, this impact has also been limited and most change that has been in the form of “quick-wins.” Other long-term and strategic change has not come as a result of the implementation of the survey findings.

Many reasons were noted as to why institutions believe there was not more impact achieved from the survey. These include:

- Perceived low response rates of students, in particular at programme level;
- The annual cyclical nature of the survey not allowing time for implementation; and
- Insufficient capabilities to fully analysis the data.

6.2 Key Findings

We also examined the implementation of outcomes from the survey. A key consideration is the alignment of HEIs’ goals and objectives with that of the data generated by StudentSurvey.ie. This alignment should ensure that HEIs not only recognise the insights, but also actively incorporate them into their practices. The data should be seen as a key tool involved in driving decision-making in institutions by senior leadership.

Many institutions noted that the periodic nature of the survey does not allow sufficient time for the implementation of the survey data. It was mentioned by some institutions that between the planning and preparation for the roll-out of the survey, and then the analysis of the data, there is little time for them to work on implementing the outcomes. However, it is important to recognise that to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data for effective change implementation, relying solely on the outcomes of a single year is insufficient. Instead, institutions must monitor patterns and trends in survey results over an extended period. Furthermore, a noteworthy observation is that a subset of HEIs have opted to forgo certain internal surveys in focusing their efforts towards StudentSurvey.ie on an annual basis.

There are a number of options to address this issue around the survey timelines. One option would be to introduce measures to assist institutions in completing the necessary work they are having difficulty completing within the current timescales. This could include StudentSurvey.ie providing additional resources to aid with the data analysis. StudentSurvey.ie could also explore additional activities that aid institutions with using the data at a strategic level.

Alternatively, StudentSurvey.ie may wish to consider running the survey every two years instead of annually. A biennial deployment of the survey will offer HEIs the flexibility to balance both internal surveys and StudentSurvey.ie, which in turn will avoid the potential fatigue that can arise from more frequent surveying. In line with the Higher Education Authority Act 2022, there is scope for the survey to run every two years rather than on an annual basis. This would also align the undergraduate StudentSurvey.ie and the PGR

StudentSurvey.ie, the latter of which is currently running on a biennial basis. It should be noted that care should be taken to ensure that such an approach, if adopted, is not perceived as removing opportunities for feedback from particular cohorts of students.

Furthermore, a notable challenge lies in the process of "closing the feedback loop" and the subsequent steps taken after survey data collection. The nature of the changes resulting from the survey are at the minute focused on "quick wins" for institutions and can sometimes lead to limited visible impact; this leads to many students questioning what happens after they respond to the survey. Institutions ensuring the closure of the feedback loop could potentially lead to increased buy-in and an improved response rate from students. Consequently, this would result in an increased positive perception of the survey.

Stakeholders have also indicated that a reason for the limited impact of the survey is due to low response rates from students. However, it must be noted that StudentSurvey.ie has previously carried out validity testing that indicates that typical response rates are valid. It is noteworthy to mention that during discussions with stakeholders in the institutions, the issue of low response rates was often linked to the programme level. Although many institutions maintain strong overall response rates, a closer examination at the programme level reveals significantly lower response rates, making it challenging to identify trends and patterns at this level. To address this, institutions, supported by StudentSurvey.ie, should allocate time during lectures for students to complete the survey, ensuring reasonable response rates across all programmes.

Furthermore, research carried out by *Fosnacht et al*¹ using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) examined whether low survey response rates regarding student engagement provide reliable information based on comparisons to high response rates. This research did not find that a 5% response rate or even a 75% response rate yields unbiased population estimates consistently. Instead, it revealed that making additional efforts to slightly increase response rates often results in only negligible shifts in survey outcomes once a minimum number of responses has been collected. This research coupled with StudentSurvey.ie's own validity testing would indicate that the current response rate of the survey is sufficient and valid.

There were concerns about the survey's accessibility, both in terms of its length and the language used. It has been noted that the survey might appear lengthy to certain participants, potentially affecting their willingness to engage fully. Additionally, the language used in the survey might not be accessible to the diverse range of students who are expected to participate in the survey. This was particularly relevant in the case of first-year students, who have had limited experience in higher education at the time of being surveyed.

Not all institutions had sufficient capabilities internally to fully analyse the survey data. Therefore, this limits the ability of the institution to implement change based on the findings and outcomes. There is potential for StudentSurvey.ie to play a more active role in supporting institutions in terms of the analysis and overall implementation of findings.

We noted that many of the Students' Unions played a key role in the promotion of the survey and in encouraging students to participate; however, many of the Students' Unions felt this was where their involvement with the survey ended. Some of the Students' Unions had little to no involvement in the analysis of the data and had limited access to the findings, which has

¹ Fosnacht, K., Sarraf, S., Howe, E., & Peck, L. K. (2017, Winter). How important are high response rates for college surveys? *The Review of Higher Education*, 40(2), 245–265.

resulted in Students' Unions having limited influence in pushing for action and change based on the survey outcomes. The Higher Education Authority Act 2022 directly specifies student representatives as partners in terms of student surveys; therefore, it is fundamental that StudentSurvey.ie further advocates for institutions to involve Students' Unions and, where possible, the wider student body in the full process of the survey.

Again, it must be stressed that there is a growing disengagement with StudentSurvey.ie for a number of reasons. Some of the concerns expressed by students include views that the survey lacks context. Some students felt that the survey allows for institutions to compare vastly different courses at different institutions by using similar metrics. There were also concerns from students that the StudentSurvey.ie is slowly moving in the direction of the UK's National Student Survey, which the UK's National Students' Union is currently boycotting. This boycott is due to concerns over the survey being used in the commercialisation of higher education institutions, contributing to course cutbacks and the raising of tuition fees. While we do not believe that this is the intended direction of StudentSurvey.ie, we must note this perception is influencing students' participation of the survey.

In order to improve the impact of the survey within the sector, it is important for StudentSurvey.ie to undertake further analysis of the factors that are influencing students' completion rates. By understanding the underlying reasons why students may not complete the survey, these issues can then be addressed. A higher response rate would show institutions and stakeholders that the survey is working as intended, thereby providing additional legitimacy to the survey.

In the face of these challenges, sustaining momentum and lasting impact emerge as key barriers. Maintaining the energy and commitment to continuously drive change based on survey insights is an ongoing effort. Additionally, the question arises as to whether there are alternative, innovative methods to capture comprehensive and insightful data beyond the established survey format. The importance of having data relating to the student experience over a long period of time was acknowledged; however, it was questioned if additional measures could be introduced to build upon the data, in order to give a better insight and understanding of data while also bridging the momentum gap from year to year.

Navigating these challenges is pivotal in ensuring the long-term effectiveness and relevance of StudentSurvey.ie, as it plays a vital role in shaping the landscape of teaching and learning in higher education.

Finally, the Higher Education Authority Act 2022 contains a specified section in relation to student surveys. This demonstrates the scope of the potential impact StudentSurvey.ie could have on a national level. It would be important for StudentSurvey.ie to ensure that the provisions of the Act are achieved in order to amplify the full effect of the survey, and to ensure its findings and outcomes can achieve their full impact in the higher education sector. This would also highlight the importance of the survey and help to re-engage senior leadership within institutions.

In line with the partnership approach explicitly noted in the Higher Education Authority Act 2022, there is a responsibility on all stakeholders to commit to the promotion, analysis and implementation of the survey and its outcomes. A failure of all stakeholders to take responsibility for their role will only result in a further limitation to the full potential impact of the survey. StudentSurvey.ie must ensure that this message and its importance is understood by all stakeholders to continue its success.

Recommendation 4: It is recommended that StudentSurvey.ie should play a more active role in assisting Higher Education Institutions with the analysis and interpretation of findings to ensure increased and effective impact.

Recommendation 5: It is recommended that StudentSurvey.ie. should work to ensure that meaningful partnership with the Students' Unions is integrated in all relevant activities. This will ensure effective collaboration while also addressing underlying issues and concerns being expressed by students.

Recommendation 6: It is recommended that StudentSurvey.ie develop complementary activities to capture the student experience to enhance the findings of the survey. These activities should aim to create greater interaction and partnership between students and staff in institutions.

7 Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Overview

Throughout our review we engaged with 38 stakeholders, including Students' Union Officers, Registrars, institutional leads for the survey, individuals involved with the subgroups of the survey, as well as the Co-Sponsor and members of the Steering Group. This involved a series of focus groups and one-to-one interviews to inform our understanding of the impact and governance of StudentSurvey.ie.

Our recommendations range from short-term “quick wins” to longer-term strategic thinking about the survey’s governance arrangements and how to ensure the continued effective impact into the future.

Our principal finding is that StudentSurvey.ie is a well-established vehicle for capturing the student experience of teaching and learning in the Irish higher education sector. However, there are significant challenges in relation to the governance, strategic objectives, and the impact of the outcomes of the survey that are limiting the significance the survey could have.

7.2 Summary of Recommendations

1. It is recommended that the Co-Sponsors of StudentSurvey.ie develop a clear and ambitious strategy and action plan for the next three years of the survey. This will include a plan for the implementation of the recommendations of this report and a vision for the survey's influence on the higher education sector going forward.
2. It is recommended that the Co-Sponsors of StudentSurvey.ie review and clearly define the objectives of the survey and communicate these to all stakeholders. These objectives should include the survey’s purpose, how the data from the survey will be used, how the feedback loop will be closed, and how the survey findings will be communicated to all stakeholders.
3. It is recommended that, to enhance the strategic value and benefits of the survey, responsibility for StudentSurvey.ie should be transferred to the Higher Education Authority while maintaining the Steering Group structure to ensure input from across the higher education sector. This move would enable greater national influence and impact while making the survey strategically relevant to institutions.
4. It is recommended that StudentSurvey.ie should play a more active role in assisting Higher Education Institutions with the analysis and interpretation of findings to ensure increased and effective impact.
5. It is recommended that StudentSurvey.ie should work to ensure that meaningful partnership with the Students' Unions is integrated in all relevant activities. This will ensure effective collaboration while also addressing underlying issues and concerns being expressed by students.
6. It is recommended that StudentSurvey.ie develop complementary activities to capture the student experience to enhance the findings of the survey. These activities should aim to create greater interaction and partnership between students and staff in institutions.

7.3 Implementation

The next step for StudentSurvey.ie is for the Steering Group to discuss the findings and recommendations of this report. An early task for the Steering Group will be to develop a detailed implementation and action plan for all the tasks recommended in this report, to establish the project management process, and to ensure that all recommendations in this report are resourced to achieve a successful outcome from this review.

Appendix 1: Stakeholder Engagement

All HEIs, Students' Unions and other relevant stakeholders involved with StudentSurvey.ie were invited to participate in focus groups as part of our stakeholder engagement process during this project. This appendix provides a record of the HEIs, Students' Unions, and other stakeholder groups that opted to join one of these focus group sessions.

| Stakeholder Groups | Name of Organisation |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Higher Education Institutions | Dublin City University Institute of Art, Design & Technology Marino Institute of Education Mary Immaculate College Maynooth University Munster Technological University National College of Art & Design National College of Ireland South East Technological University St. Angela's College, Sligo Technological University Dublin Technological University of the Shannon University College Cork University of Limerick |
| Students' Unions | Dublin City University SU Mary Immaculate College SU Munster Technological University SU South East Technological University SU Technological University Dublin SU University College Dublin SU |
| Other Stakeholders | Higher Education Authority Irish Universities Association Quality and Qualifications Ireland Technological Higher Education Association Union of Students in Ireland |