



student survey.ie

Discussion Paper on Evidencing Value through Impact

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Preface

The authors, as members of the StudentSurvey.ie Analysis and Impact Group, put forward this Discussion Paper on Evidencing Value through Impact.

It is our intention that the Paper will inform readers and introduce the key characteristics of impact. Even more so, we hope this Paper will stimulate discussion and further thinking about what it means to achieve impact and to enhance the student experience using the results of StudentSurvey.ie.

We hope that the Paper will be viewed as an evolving and dynamic document. This paper was first introduced as part of the Impact session at *Empowerment and Partnership in Student Engagement*, an online conference co-created and hosted by StudentSurvey.ie, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP).

Now we seek contributions from colleagues across all of the higher education institutions participating in StudentSurvey.ie and indeed across the higher education sector through an open consultation on the paper. All feedback received will be considered on an ongoing basis up until a revised version is presented for consideration at the StudentSurvey.ie Practitioners Forum 2021, expected to take place in May 2021.

Readers would also be well served by reading *Evidence-based Insights About Impact in Teaching and Learning*, a document written by the first author as a Forum Insight paper for the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. This document can be accessed here:

<https://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/NF-2019-Impact-Insight-web-ready-1.pdf>.



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Introduction

The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* recommended that every higher education institution put in place a comprehensive, anonymous student feedback system. Great success has been achieved in this endeavour, as all publicly funded and an increasing number of private colleges use StudentSurvey.ie (the Irish Survey of Student Engagement) as an essential mechanism to capture and amplify the student voice (see Drennan et al, 2014, for further detail about how the survey was established and O'Reilly et al, 2018, for how the Irish Survey of Student Engagement for Postgraduate Research Students [PGR StudentSurvey.ie] was established). As we look to the future of StudentSurvey.ie, our focus shifts to making greater strides in the second component of what the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* called for, which are accessible, strong, and responsive structures to ensure that action is taken promptly in relation to student concerns.

The results of StudentSurvey.ie are one part of a bigger cycle, which emphasises promoting the survey, participating in the survey, analysing the results and achieving impact. Impact has been a central focus of several recent events, such as the StudentSurvey.ie Practitioners Forum 2019 and 2020 and *Empowerment and Partnership in Student Engagement*. This Discussion Paper seeks to introduce some concepts of impact, stimulate conversation about what institutions have done or need to do, and generate questions and ideas.

For StudentSurvey.ie, achieving impact is understood to mean identifying the value which has been added, and continues to be added, to the student experience by this data collection, analysis and the subsequent integration of results into policy and practice. In other words, what real positive impacts has the survey had over its duration to date in terms of highlighting indicative areas which appear to be working well, areas for improvement and areas for further development. And in having this focus, what unexpected impacts have also taken place which have required or benefited from a strategic or procedural review and change.

The focus on the impacts of StudentSurvey.ie has increased as the survey has become an established part of the academic calendar, and more sets of data have become available.

The opportunity offered by this rich dataset has been to identify and capture any apparent evidence of impacts and to see if real lasting impact has occurred.

This enables analysis of the extent and robustness of these impacts, setting up mechanisms to uphold and monitor these, and gathering further evidence of the effects on the student learning experience.

There is now the possibility of reviewing and analysing the data per question set, per institution and per student cohort over a number of years, and to use this to see if new policies and practices have impacted, and if so to what extent, on the resulting data.

What are the key characteristics of impact and what do they mean for StudentSurvey.ie?

Impact creates a collective body of knowledge which is of use to all involved, from their own perspectives within the context in which the impact has occurred. Intended impact should be:

1) *captured through evidence which demonstrates value.*

This evidence needs to be of a scope, magnitude, and pervasiveness to identify the impact from a range of perspectives so that it allows us to move beyond the simplistic *did it work or not?* to the more important *How well did it work and across a range of contexts?* The analysis is evidence-informed, recognising the important role of professional or practice wisdom, next to scientific knowledge, in influencing and bringing about impact. Various sources of knowledge enable any decision-making that emanates from this evidence to be diverse, reliable and multi-dimensional. Evidence gathered in this way is powerful, so it needs to be used responsibly and ethically.

2) *defined as multi-faceted, often displayed as a layered model, demonstrating levels of impact and therefore sustainability.*

Impact needs to reflect a form, e.g., instrumental, conceptual, developmental, and be considered from a range of perspectives – policy-makers, learners, teaching staff, professional staff, external stakeholders, within time frames which allow for the longer term impacts to be evidenced, captured and articulated. This form needs to incorporate a range of varied evidence, both qualitative and quantitative, which enables the impact to be captured and verified as real and robust.

The data collected by StudentSurvey.ie are comprehensive and represent a large cohort of respondents. Further data gathering may take place to understand or expand on these students' feedback. This is particularly important if the data indicate something unexpected as the further data gathering can be designed to provide a more focused, multi-faceted view of the issue in question.

3) *understood and determined in terms of change, which is meaningful, relevant to the context, i.e., brings about changes in practice/ understanding which are positive and can be sustained.*

Impact needs to be part of the planning of any initiative to ensure that the intended value of the enterprise is fully articulate from the beginning – the rationale for the activity and what it is intended to provide. At the planning stage, it is important to consider what evidence will be needed to demonstrate impact, the procedures and activities which will gather the evidence, and the ways in which this evidence will be analysed and reviewed with regard to any potential intended, and also possibly any unintended, impacts.

4) *connected to outcomes, demonstrating change which has come about as a result of these outcomes being achieved.*

It is important to emphasise that an outcome is not the same as an impact, i.e., an outcome does not equal impact, and an outcome does not necessarily trigger any impact. An outcome is the result of an initiative or change process and, although presumably intended to bring about impact, it does not represent impact in itself. This has implications for project planning as it means that a project or change initiative may be finite, with stated outcomes to be achieved by a finishing date, but the impacts of this activity may start to emerge, either intended or unintended, during the process of the initiative and should continue to emerge and manifest themselves after this project or initiative's finishing date. Monitoring needs to be in place to track and identify the transformation of these outcomes into changed knowledge, behaviours and practice which become embedded into the culture of the institution, thereby representing real ongoing impact.

Equally, it should also be remembered that there can be time lags prior to impact emerging and becoming evident, post the end of a change process. This has implications for monitoring and means that any changes need to be captured at regular intervals after the end of a change process to see if any impacts have become observable or identifiable after a time lapse.

5) ***be rooted in, and relevant to their context, which enables engagement and openness to further development, capacity-building and diversification.***

Impact is inherently tied into the context in which it is planned and in which it occurs. Understanding of, and support for, what the expected or intended impacts will be, is the engine which will drive an initiative or change process, and so it is crucial that stakeholders understand, agree with and take active ownership of these as early on in the process as possible. It is important that the context is as aware and welcoming of the potential impacts as possible so that they can become embedded and normalised within the organisational culture, assuming they emerge. In an environment in which the context is not amenable, this may bring about impacts which were not intended and indeed become 'grim impacts' (McCowan, 2018) which have then to be managed and neutralised. There is also the ever-present risk that initiatives and their intended impacts are manipulated by those with political agendas so this needs to be managed, possibly through active endorsement and ownership, from the start.

As the StudentSurvey.ie becomes an increasingly influential and core part of the higher education landscape, so it has a central role in bringing together and building communities of practice, influencing decision-making, fostering capacity-building and providing a foundation upon which further research and evidence gathering can take place to integrate impact as a fundamental component of development in an organisational culture which is learner and learning-centred.

Some caveats:

- Impact may take time to manifest itself and provide confidence through an array of evidence that it has occurred. Therefore, vigilance and patience are required; impact will emerge as the conditions enable it. It should be kept in mind that impact is not about providing fixed solutions, and it may well cause further questions to be raised.
- The difference between outcomes of an initiative or change process and achieving impact can be opaque for some stakeholders. Thus: an outcome is generally observable or captured in a one-off exercise at the end of a process, e.g., after a training session, or at the end of introduction of a new policy. The challenge is to identify whether this desired improvement has been sustained and has become part of regular embedded practice/ understanding/ behaviour, i.e., caused an impact.
- Impact creates discomfort, it may force members of the community to think/ move outside their comfort zones. It is not about keeping stakeholders satisfied and unchallenged; it is about providing evidence of development, which is dynamic, transformative, lasting and constantly evolving.
- Evidence of impact depends on evidence which is collected through a variety and range of means. Decision-makers often prefer metrical data as they are regarded as objective, easy to understand and convey to others, and more qualitative data may be dismissed as unreliable due to being deemed to have a subjective element. However, impact is by nature 'messy', requires a certain tolerance for possible ambiguities and relies on the evidence reported through professional experience and practice. Qualitative data are central to the capturing of impact evidence.
- Impact analysis may raise as many questions as it answers and requires the stakeholder to maintain "a provisionality of understanding" (Bamber & Stefani, 2016, pp. 249). The importance of the rigour of the array of evidence is fundamental to showing a systemic capturing of impact evidence. Where evidence of impact is demanded for external accountability purposes, there can be a tension to provide fixed solutions at the expense of (possibly) more meaningful analyses. As Bamber & Stefani (2016) also note, "accountability privileges quantitative measurable data over indicators of enhancement", and awareness is needed of this threat to capturing the value of impact.
- A potential threat to effective impact analysis and evaluation is its potential for complexity, lack of absolute clarity and the time and resources needed to maintain and sustain the process. What is the relationship between impact and innovation, between impact and real engagement? These may be complex questions for senior policy-makers to address, especially in organisations as complex as higher education institutions.

Demonstrating value through impact

When using StudentSurvey.ie data to develop policy and decision-making procedures, clarity is needed about how the results being drawn from the data are arrived at, how they will be applied and what impact they are expected to have to achieve real sustainable change. Vision is needed to plan how to use the results of StudentSurvey.ie to grow and develop into the institution's best version of itself.

This paper suggests the following ways of putting what we know about impact into practice, but does not suggest that one should be limited to the following:

- Bring everybody along on the journey,
- Ensure students are involved in analysis and decision-making,
- Make use of the mechanisms that already exist,
- Co-identify priority areas of focus - discuss at Programme Boards, as part of Annual Reviews, etc.,
- Ensure there is ownership across the institution,
- Create an action plan which is flexible and has review built in,
- Impact is not an overnight process, be prepared for real change to take time,
- There may be impacts which you have not predicted, both desirable and not.

Every institution has different processes, and decision-making structures. While this individuality is integral to the character of each participating institution, there is one commonality all participating institutions share which can be mobilised to achieve impact:

Each institution has students and staff that are energetic, insightful, inventive and determined.

Make use of the committees and structures already in place by ensuring StudentSurvey.ie data are discussed and acted upon through these fora. This may be through Academic Council, through a sub-committee, through programme boards or programmatic review, or any decision making fora within the institution. The key is ensuring that space is created to discuss this, and, crucially, that students are involved in this process in a leadership capacity. This space for students and staff to co-identify priority areas of focus is central to ensuring this becomes a collaborative process and encourages ownership and responsibility for the impact across the institution.

The StudentSurvey.ie position

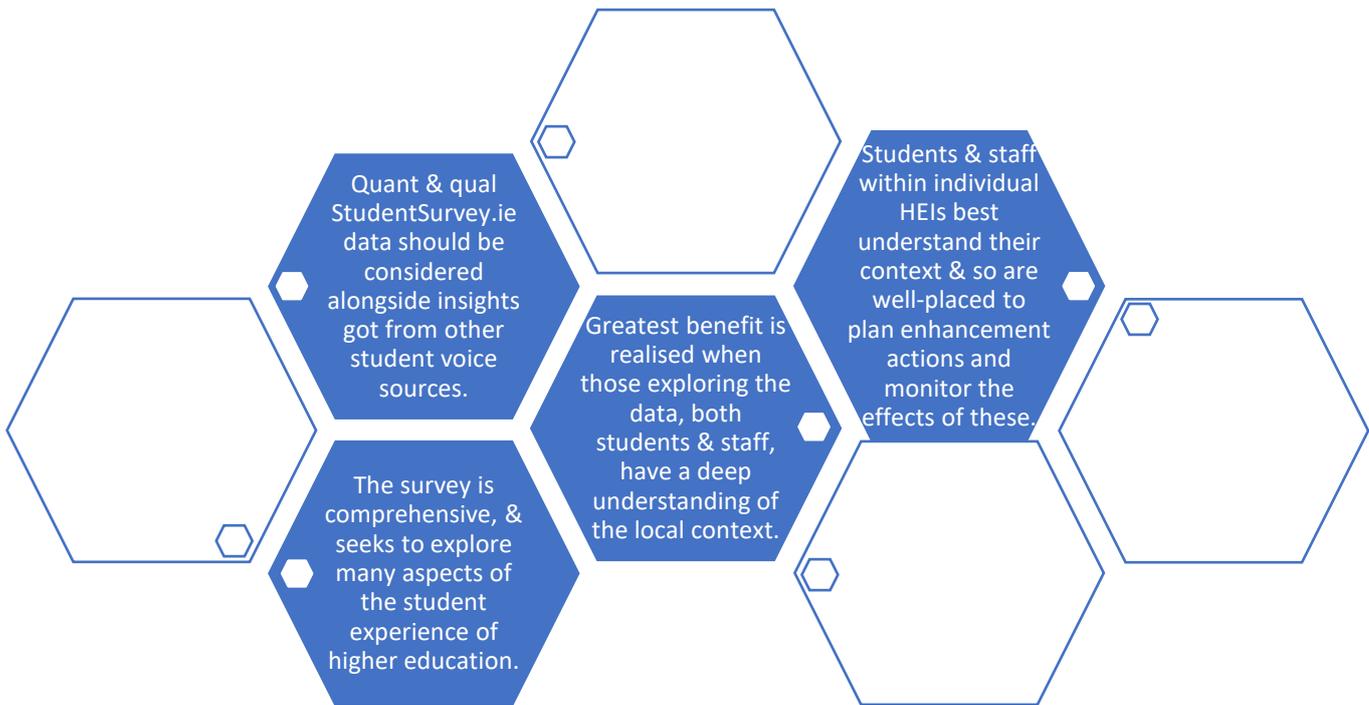
Goal 1: Going beyond the operational to the transformative.

Goal 2: Enabling the optimum conditions for the student should be at the centre of what an institution does and how they move forward.

What does impact mean for the results of StudentSurvey.ie? Fundamentally, it means using the student feedback to bring about desirable, enduring and positive changes which will further enhance learning and the whole student experience, involving the students in the decision-making at all points.

Some core actions are the following:

1. Analysing the data to gather information from students' views,
2. Translating these outcomes into feedback,
3. Actively listening,
4. Corroborating data with further capturing of evidence where appropriate,
5. Taking action to address what the students have relayed and reflected back, across the spectrum of continuing what is working well, and adapting or discontinuing what is not,
6. Using subsequent monitoring to capture and evaluate if the action had the expected or desired effect and has provided a new/ re-directed and old pathway to ongoing long-term improvement and transformation.



Bamber (2013) makes a strong point: “the implications of the term impact – that we can measure educational enhancement and attribute causes to it – do not reflect the reality of we know about the realities of education”. When evaluating the impact of any action in a higher education context, there is a multitude of factors which converge and intersect with that action as it evolves from concept to impact. Applying the theoretical concepts of achieving impact is a challenge.

StudentSurvey.ie represents a rich and ever-growing source of a rich purposeful range of student-generated data. The challenge is to have channels through which to share this, reflect on it in relation to strategic objectives and policy-making, and consequently take actions to enable the data to have ongoing impact. In using learner data as the catalyst for development and improvement, as well as for identifying risks and threats, the institution can take an approach to impact identification, evaluation and cultivation which will mean the learner is firmly situated at the centre of decision-making, and that their experiences and feedback drive the development of the institution.

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