

Irish Survey of Student Engagement 2020

A summary of the
findings

Education Matters
based on materials
provided by
StudentSurvey.ie

Almost 45,000 third-level students took part in this year's Irish Survey of Student Engagement. The survey report, published in November 2020, provides a timely snapshot of student experiences immediately before the sweeping changes introduced as a result of Covid-19. This article presents the main findings of the survey.

Introduction

In February and March 2020, almost 45,000 students in twenty-six higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland took part in StudentSurvey.ie, the Irish Survey of Student Engagement, or Suirbhé na hÉireann ar Rannpháirtíocht na Mac Léinn. Participants included first-year and final-year undergraduates and students on taught postgraduate programmes.

StudentSurvey.ie focuses on student engagement, which it describes as 'the amount of time and effort that students put into meaningful and purposeful educational activities, and the extent to which institutions provide such opportunities and encourage students to engage with them'.

Participation in StudentSurvey.ie 2020, the survey's eighth year, was the highest to date, at 44,707, lending considerable quantitative weight to the findings. These include the following:

- 44% of all respondents said their experience at their HEI contributed to their knowledge, skills, and personal development in being an informed and active citizen.
- 56% tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how something looks from their perspective.
- 71% felt that lecturers/teaching staff clearly explained course goals and requirements.
- 58% said their HEI emphasised providing support to help students succeed academically.
- 51% said their HEI emphasised providing support for their overall well-being – via recreation, health care, counselling, etc.
- 41% blended academic learning with workplace experience.
- 49% prepared for exams by discussing or working through course material with other students.
- 41% said the quality of interactions with academic staff was excellent.
- 80% would describe their entire educational experience at their HEI as good or excellent.

What is StudentSurvey.ie?

StudentSurvey.ie is a nationwide survey that asks students about their experiences of higher education. It is a collaborative partnership sponsored by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Irish Universities Association (IUA), Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), and Union of Students in Ireland (USI).

The survey responses provide useful information for HEIs to identify and build on good practice and to become aware of and address problems or challenges for students. The findings can therefore be of great use and benefit to both students and HEIs and can also inform national policy.

The Irish Survey of Student Engagement was introduced in 2013, based on the Australia and New Zealand model (itself based on the US model). It was the first national survey of its kind in Europe. Similar surveys have since been launched in other European countries. Almost 250,000 students have taken part in the Irish survey in the eight years to date.

Fieldwork for 2021 is scheduled, as usual, for February–March. The results will provide a valuable point of comparison with the experiences of students in this current year of unprecedented upheaval. With everyone still coming to terms with the myriad effects of the pandemic, students' personal reports of their experiences and how they were supported are more important than ever.

Taking place in the same period next year will be the Irish Survey of Student Engagement for Postgraduate Research Students, or PGR StudentSurvey.ie (Suirbhé na hÉireann ar Rannpháirtíocht na Mac Léinn do Mhic Léinn Taighde Iarchéime). This survey, which occurs every two years, will invite participation from all PhD and master's by research students in participating HEIs.

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Pandemic disruption

When reviewing the StudentSurvey.ie 2020 results, it is important to keep in mind that students were answering questions before Covid-19 had made a serious impact on Ireland's social, political, and educational life. By the time restrictions were implemented, and the major shift to online learning began, most of the participating HEIs had already completed their fieldwork for the survey.

In the months since, students have seen untold disruption to what was a relatively stable system before Covid-19. First years in particular, who started third-level education in the 2020–21 academic year, have had a vastly different experience from their predecessors. The effect on campus owing to public health measures and restrictions is expected to be greatest for this cohort, most of whom have not experienced higher education before.

A chapter in this year's StudentSurvey.ie National Report explored first years' experiences in Irish higher education in the past three years. The aim is to create a baseline for future comparison, for example with next year's data on aspects of on-campus experience, such as interaction with staff

and other students, and support for students' academic, civic, and social engagement.

Any such comparison must allow for the measures being taken by HEIs to implement or ramp up remote or blended alternatives to on-site learning. Future years of StudentSurvey.ie feedback will form part of an invaluable and growing data set with which to examine trends in student experience, be they full-time, part-time, or remote students.

Survey findings

In the 2020 survey, full-time students reported much higher scores than part-time or remote students on the extent to which they collaborate with peers, their perceived relationship with academic staff, and their perceptions of how much their HEI emphasises services and activities that support their learning and development.

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For example, 39% of remote students said they never worked collaboratively with other students, compared with 21% of part-time and just 8% of full-time students. Collaborating in preparation for exams saw a similar pattern: 35% of remote students, 24% of part-time and 16% of full-time students said they never did this. On whether their HEI provided social opportunities, 63% of full-time students said 'quite a bit' or 'very much', compared with 39% of part-time and 32% of remote students.

A different pattern was found in the perceived quality of interactions with others on campus: 36% of part-time respondents said they would rate their interactions with academic staff as excellent, followed by 26% of remote and 18% of full-time students. Interactions with other students were described as excellent by 43% of part-time, 34% of full-time, and 28% of remote students.

Survey questions are grouped within nine broad indicators: higher-order learning, reflective and integrative learning, quantitative reasoning, learning strategies, collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, effective teaching practices, quality of interactions, and supportive environment.

Additional questions relate less directly to these indicators but contribute to a broader understanding of student engagement. Findings from these questions include:

- 64% often or very often improved knowledge and skills that will contribute to their employability.
- 46% often or very often explored how to apply their learning in the workplace.
- 40% often or very often exercised or participated in physical fitness activities.
- 46% plan to do, have done, or were doing community service or volunteer work.
- 80% would evaluate their entire educational experience at their HEI as good or excellent.

- 84%, if they could start over again, would probably or definitely go to the same HEI.

Students were also asked to what extent their HEI experience contributed to their knowledge, skills, and personal development in various areas. They said it contributed ‘quite a bit’ or ‘very much’ to their ability to write clearly and effectively (56%), speak clearly and effectively (54%), think critically and analytically (75%), work effectively with others (68%), solve complex real-world problems (52%), and be an informed and active citizen at societal, political, or community level (44%).

Survey significance

Dr Siobhán Nic Fhlannchadha, project manager of StudentSurvey.ie, commented on the significance of the survey findings:

The value of the results of StudentSurvey.ie for 2020 is twofold. Firstly, as in previous years, the results provide insightful feedback from students about wide-ranging aspects of their experience, which institutions can use to understand and improve the student experience and to measure the impact of recent interventions. Secondly, and uniquely against the current backdrop, the results also provide us with a national and broad baseline of 44,707 students before their experience changed dramatically. The StudentSurvey.ie National Report 2020 presents these baseline data, and the same questions will be returned to in 2021 to evaluate the impact of the responses to the ongoing Covid-19 crisis on the cohort whose experience of student life is anticipated to be changed most fundamentally – first-year undergraduate students.

StudentSurvey.ie enables students to give direct, self-reported feedback on their levels of engagement and satisfaction with HEIs’ policies and practices. From the HEIs’ point of view, the survey helps to identify good practice and areas for improvement, serves as a guide for continual enhancement, and allows year-on-year comparison of key performance indicators, both internally and internationally.

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StudentSurvey.ie launched its National Report at an online conference in November, ‘Empowerment and Partnership in Student Engagement’, organised in tandem with Quality and Qualifications Ireland and the National Student Engagement Programme. The survey, accordingly, serves to empower students and strengthen partnerships at third level. Given the severe disruption that currently prevails, these qualities have never been more timely or important.

“ I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen.”

– Ernest Hemingway