

STUDENT SURVEY.IE

The Irish Survey of
Student Engagement (ISSE)
Effective feedback
and uses of ISSE
data: an emerging
picture

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ISSE 2014/02
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Chapter One

CONTEXT AND PURPOSE OF THE ISSE

The central aim of the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) is to develop a valuable source of information about students' experiences of higher education in Ireland. The survey seeks to collect information on student engagement i.e. how students engage with their learning environments. Student engagement may be defined as students' involvement in activities and environments that are likely to generate high-quality learning. Students are ultimately responsible for their own learning but this depends on institutions and staff creating an environment that encourages and promotes student involvement in educationally-relevant activities.

The development of the ISSE was informed by experiences gained from other jurisdictions where similar surveys have been undertaken. In particular, the ISSE is closely related to the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE, in operation since 2007), which has formative links with the US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, in operation since 2000). The ISSE is a comprehensive, sophisticated, internationally validated and robust survey instrument designed to elicit feedback on multiple complex themes that are pertinent to monitoring the experience of the students enrolled in our higher education institutions.

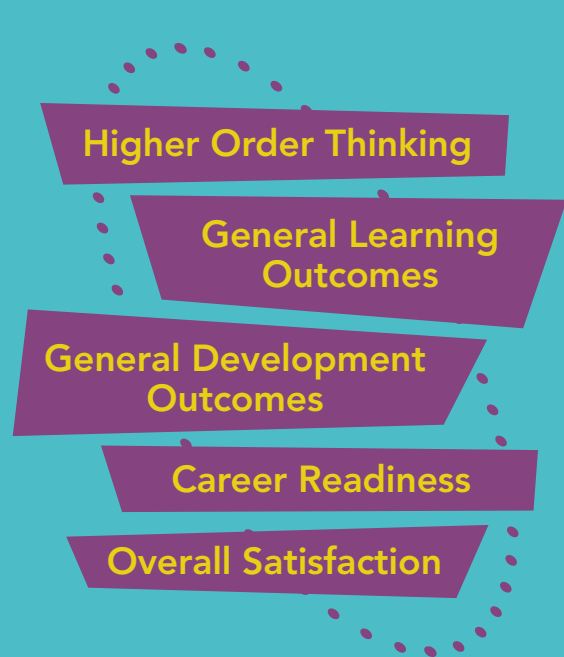
Ultimately, the survey is based on asking students questions and exploring the responses to those questions. In addition to this, responses to specific questions may be grouped together to generate scores for indices relating to student engagement or outcomes. These index scores act as useful signposts to areas that may be of particular interest. They do this by facilitating identification of scores for groups of students that may be higher or lower than scores for other students e.g. first year part-time relative to first year full-time students.

The indices are:

ENGAGEMENT INDICES



OUTCOMES INDICES



In addition to enabling consideration of the experiences of different groups of students locally,, it will be possible to consider local results in the larger context of similar institution-types, in the overall national context and relative to higher education systems in other countries that have implemented comparable surveys. Further details of the rationale, policy influences, development and testing of the survey are available in a detailed report from the 2013 pilot national survey.¹

Following the national pilot in 2013, the first “full” survey was undertaken in February and March 2014. An online survey was offered to first year undergraduate, final year undergraduate and taught postgraduate students. A total of 12,762 students from twenty six higher education institutions participated in the pilot survey. Four additional institutions took part in the 2014 survey and, in total, 19,844 students participated. Of the institutions involved in the national pilot, twenty one increased their response rate for the 2014 survey.

“The results of the survey are intended to add value at institutional level by enabling institutional leaders, subject leaders, teaching and learning advocates and quality officers to consider the experiences of different groups of students within that institution.”

1. http://studentsurvey.ie/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/ISSE_Survey_final2013.pdf

Response rates for individual participating institutions in 2014 ranged from 8.7% to 45% of the target cohorts. This improvement, and the size of the national data sets, facilitate an increasing focus on how institutions are utilising ISSE data to inform feedback to students and to staff and on how this data is beginning to be utilised to inform potential enhancement activities.

PURPOSE OF 'EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK AND USES OF DATA' REPORT

This report is intended to highlight some of the actions and discussion taking place within Irish higher education institutions in response to ISSE, alongside selected examples from abroad where similar surveys have been in operation for some time. **As such, it is intended to support sharing of effective practice and, thus, to contribute to the increasing potential value of the resulting data.**

Institutions were invited to provide information on how they are addressing feedback and considering possible uses of ISSE data. Most institutions are actively engaging with the ISSE and its implications. Appreciation is expressed for the detailed responses received from Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin City University, Dublin Institute of Technology, Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Blanchardstown, Institute of Technology Tralee, Limerick Institute of Technology, Maynooth University, NUI Galway, Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin and the University of Limerick.

It is acknowledged that implementation of the ISSE remains at an early stage and that institutions are, in terms of ISSE data, only beginning to explore its potential. Of course, most institutions have multiple existing sources of information on aspects of the student experience and some may choose to incorporate ISSE data into existing mechanisms. Other institutions may take the opportunity to develop new, or amend existing, structures to make the most effective use of this data. **Regardless of the particular approach chosen at local level, this report demonstrates that institutions are actively engaging with the collaborative project and are committed to making appropriate uses of the data for the benefit of their students.**

Chapter Two

RAISING AWARENESS OF THE ISSE: PROVIDING FEEDBACK TO STAFF AND STUDENTS

The receipt of structured data from 2014 survey fieldwork represented a key milestone for participating institutions. For the first time, individual institution-level survey data was provided alongside headline results for similar institution-types and for all participating institutions nationally. This was presented in a consistent format for all institutions.

Institutions adopted a number of approaches to promoting understanding of the survey and to providing feedback to staff. This is a vital element of building a shared understanding and interest in the ISSE and, thereby, gaining active staff support for greater promotion of student participation, in order to increase the confidence in resulting data, and facilitate the realisation of its potential to inform enhancement discussions and activities.

Raising awareness of the ISSE continued

Most institutions have provided briefings and discussion at Academic Council and at other meetings of senior personnel. In general terms, many members of these groups would be familiar with the existence of the ISSE and have some awareness of its objectives. These discussions have tended to focus on relatively high level review of the data, perhaps with specific items included for illustrative purposes.



In the **University of Limerick**, ISSE featured in specific briefings of the Vice-President Academic and Registrar's Management Group as well as in discussions of the Teaching and Learning Committee (a sub-group of Academic Council). ISSE reports were distributed to all faculties for discussion and the specific ISSE themes were aligned with the Student Evaluation of Teaching Survey. In addition, in February 2014, the university hosted a seminar on the ISSE as part of the Seminar Series funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning.



In **NUI Galway**, briefing sessions on the ISSE report, incorporating significant discussion, have been provided to all senior leaders and members of Student Services, and results from the survey were presented to Academic Council. In addition, ISSE data has featured in discussions with staff in relation to the transition of new students to the University.

Within **Dublin City University (DCU)**, formal sharing and discussion of ISSE results has taken place primarily through key university committees.



These communications have taken the form of presentations and reports to committees including the Education Committee, Quality Promotion Committee, Academic Council, and Faculty Teaching Committees or Management Boards.

The analysis and presentation of ISSE results is conducted by the DCU Institutional Research and Analysis Officer, and has focused on a number of goals. The analysis has been primarily conducted using institutional level data, with limited analysis to examine variances between undergraduate and postgraduate cohorts, and limited analysis of faculty-level data.

DCU has identified the following goals for communication of the ISSE:

- Increase awareness of the national ISSE survey, and initiate discussion on how the results can be embedded within educational enhancement initiatives, and strategic decision-making
- Explain and increase understanding on the ISSE Engagement and Outcome indices and what they can tell us about the student experience at DCU
- Provide an understanding of DCU's index scores benchmarked against comparable national and international data
- Provide information on individual item responses, particularly with relation to questions which impact on the quality of teaching and learning at DCU
- The presentation of some limited faculty level analysis to faculty teaching committees
- Presentation of institutional level results to the DCU Students' Union Representative Council, with a particularly focus on the ISSE indices, and individual items pertaining to the nature of interactions between the university and the student body.

Relationship between value of the survey and feedback / action

Students understand and value IS&E

Staff understand and value IS&E

Analysis, feedback and action

“When students understand the value of IS&E, they are more likely to participate. When data is known to be representative, institutions are more likely to analyse it and to act on feedback. When staff understand and communicate the value of IS&E by acting on results, students are further encouraged to take part.”



Maynooth University has completed an in-depth analysis of the institutional data for each cohort of students (first year, final year

and taught postgraduates) and compared Maynooth students' responses to those of students in all universities in order to identify areas of comparative strengths and weaknesses. The analysis has been undertaken by the Vice-President for Strategy and Quality. The review has been particularly useful as the ISSE provides data that is highly pertinent to the most extensive curriculum reform ever undertaken by the university.

The publication of the ISSE 2014 report was immediately marked by a posting on the university website which included a welcome and endorsement of the survey by the University President and also by the President of the Student Union. The press release also included a sample of the findings in relation to Maynooth and specifically noted areas of commendation for the university community.

The ISSE is regarded as one of many tools used by Maynooth University to monitor, review and improve its students' engagement and the outcomes they achieve. The survey results are therefore of strategic importance and have already been considered by the University Executive, the Academic Council, the Teaching and Learning Committee, the Quality Committee and the high level structures for implementing the Maynooth Curriculum Initiative. Student representatives participate in each of these fora. Further presentations are planned for January to each of the Faculties in order to reach greater numbers of staff and also to a larger group of student representatives.

In these presentations, the objectives are broadly similar to those of the communication strategy in DCU. The focus is very much on

- Creating awareness of the potential of ISSE
- Clarifying the underlying conceptual model and methodological issues
- Interpreting the high level index scores and their diagrammatic representation, and how to assess differences between Maynooth University scores and comparators such as the scores for all Universities
- Identifying from the responses to individual items/ questions where there are strengths and weaknesses and aligning the discussion with the objectives of the Maynooth Curriculum Initiative

- Monitoring differences in responses from students at different stages – comparing responses from first and final year undergraduates, and between final year undergraduates and taught postgraduates
- Benchmarking the responses of Maynooth students against the responses of all university students and identifying areas of comparative strength and weakness.

An important issue in the analysis of the data is the reliability of the responses to individual questions from samples of different sizes – for example comparing responses from first and final year students, or comparing responses of Maynooth students to those of all students. In order to overcome this problem, standard errors were calculated for different sample sizes and confidence levels were determined for differences in responses between samples. This helped to eliminate a significant number of differences as they are statistically not significant.

In **Trinity College Dublin**, analysis and presentation of ISSE results was conducted by the Quality Office.



Presentation and discussion of results has occurred at various committees including Quality Committee, Undergraduate Studies and Graduate Studies Committees and Council. Each of these received a high level report comparing results across TCD with other Irish Universities on each of the indices, with trend data from the 2013 ISSE national pilot, and providing a breakdown by each cohort in addition to an analysis of the free text data.

Trinity College also investigated faculty-level data and provided information to Faculty Executive Committees. Each faculty was provided with a faculty-specific report. In addition to the information provided to College Committees, these reports included a comparison of the ISSE index scores across faculties, with a breakdown by cohort, by gender and by free text comments. Although the TCD faculty structure differs from the ISCED broad categories used in national data, the university requested an amendment to the data structure for its own data. This was based on matching individual programme and ISCED Codes to the TCD faculty structure. Analysis of the Field of Study with the largest number of respondents in that faculty was provided as an exemplar of analysis that can be produced in future years as the number of respondents is anticipated to increase.

The release of ISSE 2014 data coincided with the launch of the new Trinity College Strategic Plan 2014-2019. Key stakeholders across the university with responsibility for implementation of strategic plan initiatives were identified in order to determine potential uses of ISSE data in inform planning of related projects. In this way, it is hoped to build awareness of, and support for, the use of the ISSE data. It is also intended to demonstrate to students that ISSE is used to inform institutional planning and that this participation leads to direct benefits for students in TCD.

The Strategic Plan 2014-2019 goal to 'Promote Student Life' provides an example of this integration of ISSE data.

Recognition has been given to the need to extend transition supports to new students in TCD. The Dean of Students is the sponsor for projects in support of this initiative and has been identified as a key user of the ISSE dataset. Three of the ISSE Engagement indices – Active Learning (AL), Student-Staff Interactions (SSI) and Supportive Learning Environment (SLE) – have been identified as repeated year on year measures to assess the success of supports to enhance transitions to College life for the first year cohort. The new supports include the planned recruitment of a First Year Experience Officer. The ISSE data will help define the brief for the recruitment for this position and year on year scores on the above three indices for the first year cohort will be used to inform the work plan for the First Year Experience Officer.



In **University College Dublin**, additional analysis was undertaken through the Office of Institutional Research. This involved analysis of data at College, subject and, in some

cases where results were statistically representative, at programme level.

College and subject level reports were designed with the aim of presenting the ISSE results for the internal university audiences, to assist in the explanation and understanding of the ISSE Engagement and Outcome indices and to avoid simplistic interpretation of complex data. These reports are organised by index to show the results of that index for each of the colleges in the university, the university total data and the national university sub-sector comparators. The results for the overall index score and for each question contributing to that index are included. Statistical testing was carried out to establish if respondents were representative of the College or subject area and if the results differed significantly from overall university level results or national university sector results.

Analysis and presentations in UCD were designed to help explain the survey findings, to improve the understanding of the methodology and to explain the ISSE engagement and outcome indices. Presentations have been made to the University Management Team, College Executive meetings, and the University Sub-committee for Student Experience. The UCD Teaching & Learning centre has used the data at university level and with individual schools to aid curriculum planning and in their staff training programmes.

Information packs have been produced to include customised reports, a copy of the published national report and university designed infographics. These will be issued to each college and unit to coincide with the promotion of the 2015 survey.

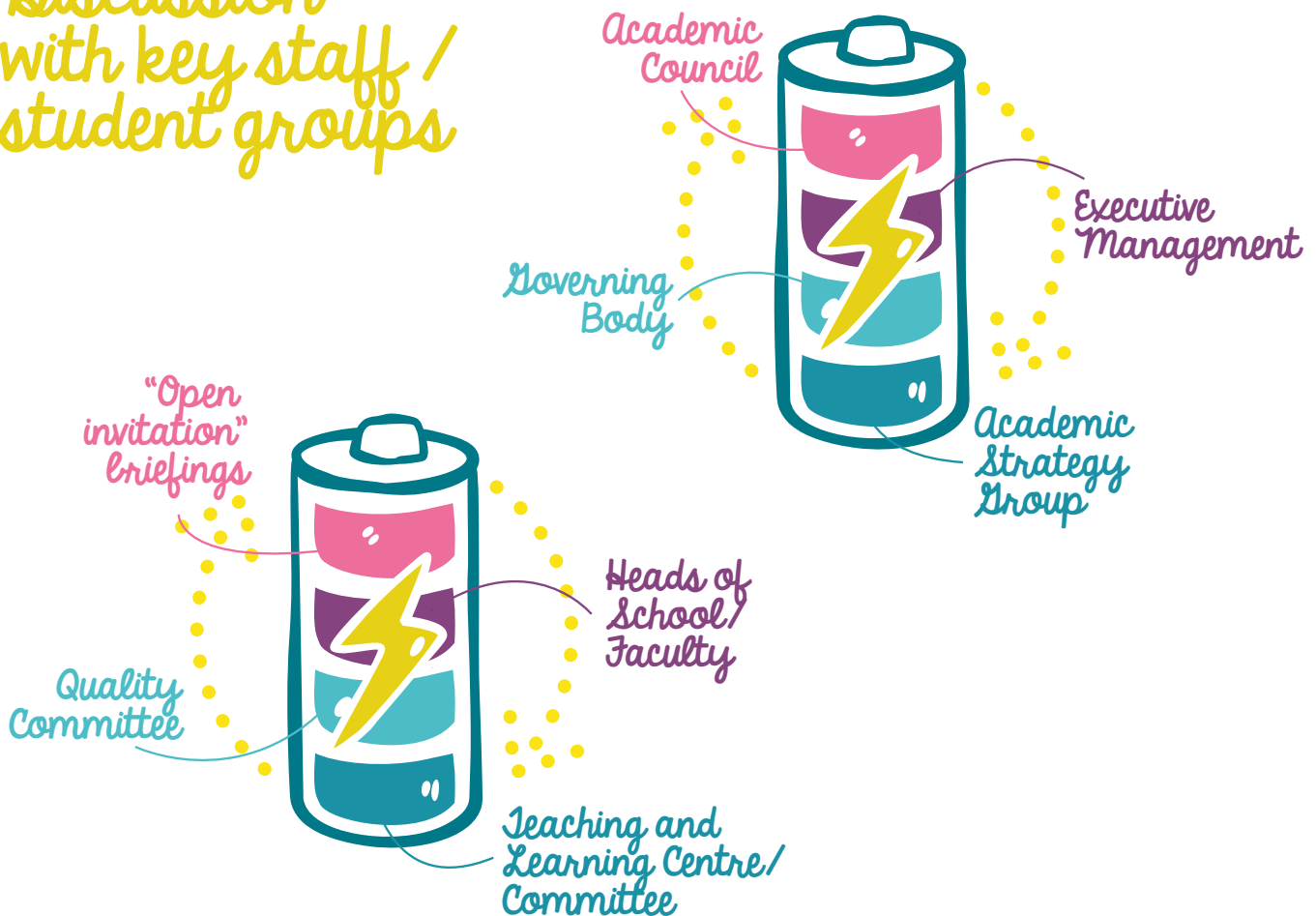
“Use of ISSE data to inform the UCD Strategic Plan 2014 - 2019 is intended to demonstrate to students that ISSE informs institutional planning and that student participation leads to direct benefits.”

WHAT DO THESE EXAMPLES TELL US?

In addition to key committees and boards, institutions have sought to raise awareness and understanding among other targeted personnel who are likely to have greatest interest in particular subsets of the data. These discussions have tended to include examples of specific items with a particular focus on illustrating the potential of the data when high / increased participation rates facilitate confident analysis of disaggregated data, for example, data relating to specific sub-groups of the student population such as at broad faculty level. Some institutions, and some faculties within those, have already secured sufficiently high numbers of respondents to undertake this analysis with confidence. Others plan to do so by aggregating data from multiple years in order to increase confidence levels.

The objective of reliable analysis of data from sub-groups is more readily achieved with increased response rates so it is important that staff appreciate the potential value of student participation in the survey. Students are more likely to participate when staff communicate the value they place on the survey data. There is considerable research to indicate that the greatest incentive to student participation in surveys is the belief that the student voice is being listened to and that appropriate action will follow. Therefore, it is regarded as important that students understand the nature of the ISSE and feel that institutions view their participation and the results as valuable contributors towards continued enhancement of their higher education experience.

Discussion with key staff / student groups



“The objective of reliable analysis of data from sub-groups is more readily achieved with increased response rates so it is important that staff appreciate the potential value of student participation in the survey. Students are more likely to participate when staff communicate the value they place on the survey data.”

All institutions have indicated that ISSE results have been presented to existing committees that include students' union representatives. In addition, many have held specific meetings to discuss ISSE results with students' union officers and / or with class representatives (or faculty convenors).



In communicating the results of ISSE to staff and students, **Athlone Institute of Technology** has identified the following aims:

- To provide specific information in relation to particular areas such as the quality of teaching and learning within the institute in order that improvements can be made
- To provide a rich source of data that can inform self-assessment and quality assurance enhancements and also provide both quantitative and qualitative analysis
- To create a greater awareness of this national survey and increase understanding of the ISSE and what it can tell us about the student experience.

Athlone Institute of Technology presented local ISSE results directly to the SU President as well as through SU class representative meetings. The institute plans to develop a video presentation to students which, it is hoped, will highlight specific findings from ISSE 2014 and signal the role of ISSE as a key feedback tool in the future.

Following the 2013 national pilot in **Dublin City University**, the Vice-President for Academic Affairs convened a workshop with Deans of all Faculties, associate Deans of Teaching and Learning, SU sabbatical officers and student faculty convenors. Presentation of ISSE results was followed by discussion between student representatives and senior staff on issues arising from the data. Results from ISSE 2014 have also been presented to the student class representative council.



Similarly structured discussions have taken place in **NUI Galway** where senior personnel have met with student sabbatical officers to discuss the report, ensuring that all officers have a printed copy to retain. This was in addition to student participation in Academic Council and a presentation to Class Council which highlighted particular aspects of the data, with Supportive Learning Environment being selected as a focus for the first year.



Trinity College Dublin has distributed the ISSE report to student union officers and holds regular meetings with them on specific projects within the College Strategic Plan (that are supported by use of ISSE data). A general communication was sent to all students presenting the areas where feedback had identified positive aspects and also areas where feedback identified a desire for improvement or greater focus by the college.





University College Dublin designed a specific infographic, "How UCD Students Responded" for distribution to Colleges, Schools and other groups throughout the university.

After 2014 survey fieldwork, the university established a small working group to consider how to provide effective feedback to UCD students and staff. It was decided to present findings and feedback in the form of posters to be distributed across the campus. The presentation of the ISSE Indices in poster form was considered too complex and open to simplistic misinterpretation. It was decided that it would be more suitable and of greater interest for both the anticipated audience and the medium of distribution, to present individual items from the questionnaire.

To present results, all questions from the ISSE questionnaire were categorised into themes. The working group reduced these to 40 items for inclusion in the infographic poster. The themes devised included "Respondent Demographics", "Academic Life", "Workload", "Life Outside the Classroom", "Meeting and Working with Others", "Work-life Balance" and "Overall Satisfaction". The graphics developed for the poster were designed to facilitate being cropped into smaller sections by theme. A related set of slides and images has been developed for use in reporting and for promotion of the 2015 survey.

IRISH SURVEY OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT HOW UCD STUDENTS RESPONDED

WHO RESPONDED



FEMALE
60%
1322



MALE
40%
838

TARGET GROUP

FIRST YEAR STUDENTS
FINAL YEAR STUDENTS
GRADUATE TAUGHT STUDENTS

ACADEMIC LIFE



- 73%** used an online learning system to discuss or complete an assignment e.g. Blackboard*
- 7%** participated in a community-based project [e.g. volunteering] as part of programme*
- 61%** used email or an online forum to communicate with teaching staff*

72%
75%

WORKLOAD



- 69%** of students read 5 or more assigned readings
- 40%** of students did 5 or more assignments between 1000 - 5000 words
- 46%** of students had 3 or more pieces of work that took one, or more than one hour, to complete
- 47%** of students read 5 or more extra readings

OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM



45%
53% exercise
physical
19% attend
music

A number of institutions have developed specific websites (microsites) and e-zines to address student feedback, or are in the process of doing so. Dublin City University and Dublin Institute of Technology outline their respective plans as follows.



It is intended to use the **DCU** student feedback website, "Your Voice Heard", as a mechanism for sharing the result of the ISSE alongside other student feedback surveys. Where possible, this website also provides an opportunity to showcase examples of good practice where initiatives and enhancements take place as a result of responding to student feedback from ISSE. It is hoped that this will provide information to students on where their feedback has driven quality enhancements within the university- in essence, cases where their voice has been heard, and responded to.

Dublin Institute of Technology plans to circulate a regular e-zine, the DIT Student Update, which will be sent to students throughout the academic year. The update is a collaboration between DIT Public Affairs and the Campus Life office. DIT hopes to create a 'newsy' and relevant e-zine which provides students with real feedback on issues that are hugely relevant to them. DIT hopes that the 'You Said – We Did' section becomes an integral part of the DIT conversation each month and that relevant feedback can be targeted to students in a timely manner that fits in with the academic calendar.



PLANNING FOR FEEDBACK

The discussion and feedback processes described in this section present only an overview of increasingly comprehensive activities taking place in some institutions. The sequencing of activities is carefully planned to incrementally develop greater understanding.

For example, ISSE results are considered by many fora within **Limerick Institute of Technology**.



Executive Management met to discuss the report on the day it was released in November. The VP Academic Affairs along with two Heads of Faculty and the Assistant Registrar met, in November, with the Students Union Executive and Student Class Representatives from all classes presenting the results of the 11 indices. Results will be presented to Academic Council and Governing Body in December/ January. Faculties and Departments will also consider the results relevant to them at Faculty, Department and Programme Boards and at Staff Student Liaison Groups.



“It is important that the results would be made available not only to University staff but to students as well”

Student from national pilot 2013



Raising awareness of the ISSE continued



Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology outlines the following sequence of activities to promote awareness and understanding of the data:

Summary institution-level report

- > *Briefing of Academic Council*
- > *Briefing of Students' Union*
- > *Briefing of Centre for Educational Development*
- > *Briefing of Executive Board*
- > *Report to all staff and all students*
- > *Data analysis workshop*
- > *Head of School briefings and action workshops*

Chapter Three

ANALYSIS AND USES OF ISSE DATA

Analysis of the rich dataset from ISSE offers great potential to inform discussions and enhancement activities throughout institutions.

ANALYSIS OF A RICH DATASET

Chapter 7 of the report “Irish Survey of Student Engagement: Results from 2014” includes the following observation:

The nature of the survey results leads to a detailed dataset. This dataset reflects the richness of the higher education experience. However, due to the level of detail, it can prove challenging to interpret the data to identify priority areas for further consideration, whether these reflect examples of best practice or areas that would benefit from improvement.

Institutions already have multiple sources of information on the experiences of their students and use these for a variety of purposes. Nevertheless, analysis of ISSE data is a new undertaking for all institutions, although a small number had independently investigated similar surveys, and specifically the potential of questions from the NSSE, in recent years. The national collaboration and relevant working groups defined specific formats for the presentation of data and these were used by the third party survey contractor to return institution-level data files after the conclusion of all national fieldwork. Some statistical analysis was included in these files in addition to the underlying data (with student identifiers removed).

The immediate first step for institutions was identification of the appropriate expertise to analyse and interpret this data. This varied by institution with local analysis undertaken by the Institutional Research Officer, Registrar's office, Quality office, a specifically formed sub-group of Academic Council, or other key personnel with institution-wide strategic roles. Support from the national project was available and a series of regional data analysis workshops were convened to facilitate discussion of common issues. In addition, responses were provided to specific requests which varied from the presentation of local data at faculty level to contributions to local briefing events and workshops.

While it is entirely appropriate to provide support for local analysis and interpretation, the variation in local capacity to undertake such analysis remains a challenge to be addressed. Institutions are likely to realise the potential of the rich dataset only when they have ready access to bespoke analysis and interpretation of their data. The national ISSE project can, and indeed should, support such analysis and interpretation and other stakeholders have an interest and valuable contribution to make. For example, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning has a keen interest in exploring the data at disciplinary level, as outlined later in this report. Nevertheless, it is important that institutions actively take ownership of data originating from their students, and that students understand that "their institution" is actively analysing their feedback in order to improve the experience for all. Staff and students within institutions remain best placed to appreciate the context for local data and provide the most informed perspective from which to identify best practice and priority actions.

USES OF ISSE DATA

Institutions have multiple sources of information on the experiences of their students. It is important that all stakeholders appreciate that ISSE data can contribute to this institutional intelligence. ISSE data should be considered in context with other information sources. This enables institutions, staff and students, to determine the extent to which ISSE data identifies 'new' areas of interest or confirms existing perceptions of good practice or areas for improvement. Triangulation of data provides increased confidence that findings are valid. Linking ISSE data with other data sources enables evaluation of the impact of initiatives over time. One of the greatest benefits of the national ISSE project is that institutions can review their own data in the context of similar institution-types, all institutions nationally and, to some extent, with other institutions internationally, while taking account of cultural and contextual differences.

Limerick Institute of Technology

has reviewed ISSE responses with data from the EU Student Barometer Survey to identify common trends and to review specific items that are viewed as priorities for the institute, such as gaining employability skills and engaging with real-world problems. Similar responses to questions that address the same, or similar, issues build confidence in the accuracy of the data.



Trinity College Dublin

also participates in the International Student Barometer (ISB) and the ISSE non-domiciliary student data can provide an additional lens on the International Student experience. This perspective is regarded as particularly important because of a related Trinity College Strategic Goal to increase the international student population. The college regards the two data sets as distinct but complementary and plans to use both sets of data to support the Self-Assessment of the Code of Practice for International Learners, a requirement of the International Education Mark² which is a national development being implemented in 2015.



2. [http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/International-Education-Mark-\(IEM\).aspx](http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/International-Education-Mark-(IEM).aspx)



Institute of Technology Tralee outlines an approach described as 'Accentuate the Positive / Eliminate

the Negative (APEN)'. The institution indicates that data analysis is being undertaken by the Registrar's office to present relevant findings to appropriate units across the institution. This approach has the key aim of taking advantage of positive experiences of students in particular areas in order to apply that practice to enhance the student experience on other areas. The Institute refers to a cycle of quality enhancement whereby the institution takes responsibility for actions intended to improve student engagement and outcomes, and where students are supported to respond.

This approach reflects the nature of the ISSE as a measure of student engagement i.e. the survey seeks to collect data on aspects of student life that are broader than formal academic provision such as lectures and workshops, but also looks at how students spend their time.



NUI Galway states that data is used in a variety of ways to inform strategic planning and curriculum review. In

particular, there is an ongoing review and reform of curricular structures and offerings across a number of Schools and Colleges to ensure programmes articulate well with institutional mission, the attainment of key Graduate Attributes, strategic priority areas and research themes, the needs of employers and wider society. The process of review and renewal will encompass issues around clarity over pathways, progression, flexibility of delivery, approaches to teaching and the development of student learning skills and confidence whilst being cognisant of the requirements of the disciplines. The performance indicators will be new/revised programme structures and offerings shaped by available evidence, future projections, and institutional, regional and national strategies. This work is informed by the results of the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) and when student participation increases it will be possible to do this on an individual College basis.

The NUI Galway response demonstrates significant potential uses of the survey data in future years and notes that, with regard to targets for the institution's strategic plan, engagement and outcome indices will be monitored and the university aims to lead nationally in some areas of student engagement.

WHAT DO THESE EXAMPLES TELL US?

In general, institutions have tended to focus on analysis of their own data relative to similar institution-types while taking account of national results. Some institutions have examined 2014 data alongside 2013 pilot data. This signals an approach that offers significant potential over time, particularly when considering the results for similar student cohorts such as final year part-time or full-time students over a number of years. In addition, institutions managing relatively small number of responses from particular sub-groups can aggregate data from multiple survey iterations to generate a sample size that is sufficiently robust for reliable analysis. For most institutions to date, the number of responses limits the ability to analyse data with a high degree of confidence for field of study ("broad faculty") or similar levels.

Nevertheless, it is appropriate to explore the potential of ISSE data for particular sub-groups. Experience from AUSSE and NSSE, as well as early analysis of ISSE data, indicates that **greatest variation occurs within institutions rather than between institutions**. Response rate is less important when the sample size is relatively large as there is confidence that respondents are representative of the population. Comparison of ISSE findings with other local information sources will inform any judgement on the accuracy of ISSE findings at local level.

Experience from implementation of the NSSE is informative, given its context as a long established survey that is well-regarded by institutions and other stakeholders. Frequently Asked Questions³ relating to response rates include some potentially surprising findings: "In 2014, institutional response rates for NSSE ranged from 6% to 90%, with an average of 32%".

3. http://nsse.iub.edu/pdf/Resp_Rate_FAQ.pdf

“This is a survey of student engagement ... this is broader than formal academic provision and also looks at how students spend their time.”



Analysis and uses of ISSE data continued

This would suggest that many Irish institutions are making notable progress towards achieving “expected” response rates.

The document continues “NSSE research suggests that the total number of respondents is more important than response rate in assuring that first-year student and senior institutional estimates are reliable. A NSSE study (Fosnacht, Sarraf, Howe, & Peck, 2013) found that even relatively low response rates provided reliable institution-level estimates, albeit with greater sampling error and less ability to detect statistically significant differences with comparison institutions.”

The study suggests that relatively low response rates can yield quality data at institutional level. For the ISSE, it remains a key objective to increase student participation rates. Achieving high response rates lends greatest confidence and facilitates reliable analysis of data for smaller subgroups of the student population. However, it is logical for institutions to explore the potential of ISSE data relating to sub-groups of the student cohort, (i) in order to suggest possible areas for further consideration (with appropriate caveats) and, (ii), to demonstrate to staff and students the potential benefits of securing greater participation to inform robust and credible analysis and interpretation. The NSSE study could be regarded as supporting the view that there may be valuable insights in the data, even with response rates that are lower than those aspired to.

In addition to analysis within institutions, ISSE offers potential to inform other discussions relating to higher education. For example, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning plans to make use of ISSE data across institutions as described in the following pages (see pages 22-23).

Making use of ISSE data

ISSE fieldwork generates a rich dataset with significant potential. It is likely to take some time (and multiple iterations of the survey) for institutions, individually or collectively, to identify the specific elements that will prove most valuable to support local activities and priorities. Some of the greatest benefit will be realised with data from multiple years’ fieldwork. To date, institutions have reviewed 2014 data using a number of approaches.

LINK ISSE DATA TO OTHER INFORMATION SOURCES

Institutions have reviewed ISSE data against other known information sources. This confirms, or not, whether apparent findings or issues have been accurately identified or merit further investigation. In the US, many institutions have sought to corroborate NSSE findings with other institutional data because this increases confidence in data use for decision-making.

Limerick Institute of Technology reviewed responses to individual questions with existing data generated by participation in the EU Student Barometer survey.



Trinity College Dublin also participates in the International Student Barometer. While the population of non-domiciliary students responding to ISSE was relatively low in 2014, it is anticipated that this number will increase in future and that, over time, both datasets will be used to the inform planning and achievement of enhancement activities. In addition in 2014, TCD completed a programme review of the Undergraduate Science Programme for which a student evaluation survey was conducted. The population for this survey was second and third year students.



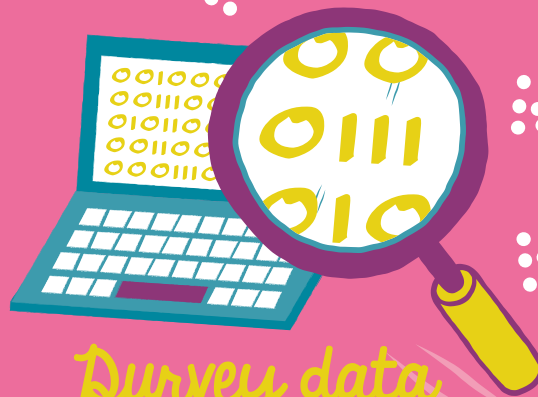
continued on page 24

How we use data from the survey

Link to other information sources



Compare responses to individual question items

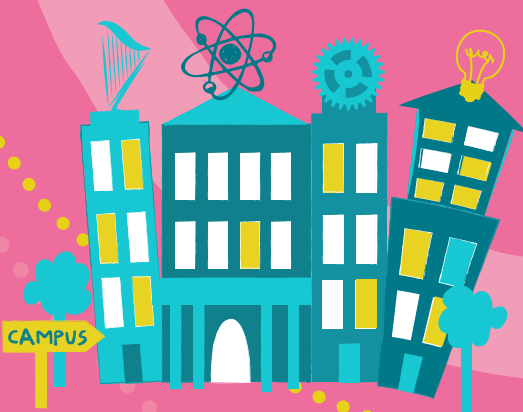


Survey data

Review of free text responses



Explore faculty-level reporting (or other sub-groups)





NATIONAL FORUM

FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

RECOGNISING THE POTENTIAL OF ISSE FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ACROSS DISCIPLINES

The National Forum is committed to developing and implementing initiatives that work across institutions to understand how student experiences differ across disciplines.

This activity includes using disciplinary communities of practice (e.g. maths, science, health, humanities) to explore discipline-based enhancement potential. In the first instance, the Forum will develop a template for disciplinary analysis. This can be used as the ISSE data becomes more representative over multiple iterations and, therefore, more generalizable for the purposes of disciplinary inquiry.

While many key innovations in Irish Higher Education have been developed to address specific sectoral themes such as first year retention, there has been much less focus on the very real differences that exist between student learning needs in different disciplines.

A strong evidence-based approach is needed to identify what these differences are and how best to develop discipline-specific teaching and learning approaches that recognise the particular needs of students in different fields of study.

The National Forum sees potential in the use of ISSE data as an increasingly useful evidence base to assist the higher education sector to gain robust insights about the learning experiences and outcomes of students across a diversity of disciplines. The ISSE is the first Irish initiative that has the promise of generating comparable national data across disciplines relating specifically to the student experience in different areas of study. Therefore, ISSE data have the potential to provide a cross sectoral and discipline/department based picture of student experiences, perceptions, activities and engagement that will become increasingly useful in the formative and enhancement orientated analysis of discipline based teaching and learning.

As response rates increase and reliable year on year information emerges, the student survey will be an important and influential source of knowledge, informing strategic development across the sector but also providing good evidence-based guidance for teachers, course directors and heads of department across all disciplines.

However, Institutions need to interrogate the survey data in a way that aligns with their own priorities and strategies in order to maximise its potential. Knowing how and why students' learning and teaching needs may vary according to disciplinary difference can drive the development of evidence-based improvements in effective teaching and learning.

The National Forum will lead initiatives that use the ISSE data in a way that enables discipline-specific differences to be identified in order to design and deliver targeted disciplinary innovations to enhance teaching and learning. These initiatives will focus on building processes and frameworks that can be used by institutions to optimise their analysis of the survey data. Analysis of the survey data should recognise the disciplinary similarities and differences and build knowledge of specific disciplinary characteristics across the whole sector. In addition, a focus on how an analysis of the ISSE data can guide enhancements in learning innovation across differences will be an integral part of all initiatives.

Rather than focus on the overall results of the ISSE, Phase 1 initiatives will use the survey framework to support the articulation of discipline priorities, activities and pedagogical interventions. In this way it will be possible to produce a more fine-grained and discipline-appropriate approach to the enhancement of teaching and learning - while also engaging discipline leaders across the sector in dialogue about how student engagement survey data can best be used in the future.

The National Forum is committed to:

- Engaging with discipline leaders (Deans and heads of school/heads of faculty, accreditation bodies/employers) to identify key elements of the survey instrument that have particular importance to enhancing teaching and learning within their discipline
- Developing a discipline-specific teaching and learning framework as a resource to disciplines/institutions in interpreting student survey data in a meaningful way in order to identify and improve excellence in teaching and learning
- Building a commitment to the utilisation of student data across disciplines and regional clusters in effective and evidence-based ways
- Ensuring that outputs will be integrated with the developing national framework for professional development

continued from page 20

The (student evaluation) survey received a 91% response rates from second year students and 68% from third year students. It provided the opportunity for students to respond to open comment questions 'what are the three best aspects' and 'three possible improvements' and there is a high degree of concordance between the open comments analysis conducted for ISSE and the qualitative findings of the Programme Student Evaluation Survey. This lends credibility to emerging findings of the ISSE and supports the overall drive to increase participation rates.

COMPARE RESPONSES TO INDIVIDUAL QUESTION ITEMS

Student responses to individual questions form the core element of the survey. While engagement and outcomes indices provide useful additional analysis and navigation structures, in many cases it is most informative to examine individual items.



Institute of Technology Tralee has reviewed its own students' responses to individual questions against

responses from similar institution-types nationally. Staff identified those questions where local responses are highest, and lowest, relative to the institution-type Institutes of Technology nationally. Identification of responses to specific questions will inform local discussion at a very practical level in a manner that can easily be explained to students.



Institute of Technology Blanchardstown explored individual questions from two distinct perspectives. The ISSE team reviewed responses to

individual survey items, noting those where local responses for final year students differed from the equivalent responses for all final year students nationally and then prioritised items with greatest differences for further discussion. Separately, staff examined responses to individual questions considered to have a bearing on the Careers Service. Fifteen specific questions were identified to inform discussion with the Careers Manager.

EXPLORE FACULTY-LEVEL REPORTING (OR OTHER SUB-GROUPS)

A number of institutions have explored the potential of examining ISSE data at broad faculty / school level. Use of the data file enables index scores and item responses to be presented by faculty / school. This, in turn, enables the development of faculty-level reports that present results for each faculty in various contexts which may include alongside other faculties, overall results for the institution or in the context of national broad fields of study where this is appropriate.

Accepting the important caveat of ensuring that appropriate rigour is applied to the data, some institutions have already undertaken informal analysis of faculty level data as part of structured activities to increase understanding of the potential value of the data when the number of respondents is sufficient. The aim, here, is to build staff interest and support for active promotion during future iterations of the survey which, in turn, is expected to contribute to increased reliability of data. Similarly, some institutions are beginning to consider when the data can be regarded as sufficiently reliable to act as an information source for formal reviews of programmes.

Dublin City University has stated that the future internal analysis of ISSE data will focus on dissemination of faculty-level results. The aggregation of three years' data will provide a sample size that is robust enough to enable reliable analysis at this level.



Trinity College Dublin provided a faculty level report to each of the three faculties as outlined earlier. It included an analysis of:



- TCD across all of the ISSE indices compared with all other Irish Universities
- Trend analysis from ISSE 2012/13 (Pilot) and 2013/14
- Analysis of cohorts within the faculty across all ISSE Indices
- Analysis of cohorts across the faculty by gender
- Analysis of one Field of Study in the faculty with the highest number of respondents.

As noted in the earlier section, this report structure is regarded as an exemplar for future analysis and contributes to demonstrating the value of ISSE data to a wider group of staff.

REVIEW OF FREE TEXT RESPONSES

The data file returned to institutions includes responses to individual questions at respondent level. It is worth noting that this data has been 'cleaned' prior to being made available i.e. student identifiers have been removed and free text responses have been cleaned by a third party to remove any individual names that may have been present.

Three questions allowed free text responses. One of these asks how students heard about the survey. Responses to two other specific questions offer particular insight to wider issues. These ask about the best aspects of student engagement and what could be improved about how the institution engages students in learning. Most institutions have reviewed responses to these questions to identify specific issues for follow up discussion and action.



TRINITY
COLLEGE
DUBLIN

Trinity College Dublin looked at the open-comments questions across first year, final year and postgraduate- taught populations

for each faculty to identify common themes in terms of what TCD does well in engaging students in learning and what it could do better.

The College found that results were highly consistent for first years across all faculties. It was found that improvements identified related to students requesting 'more of' what they regarded as good aspects e.g. active, independent and problem – based learning, group learning or group projects, small classes/ tutorials, continuous assessment and engagement/ interaction with staff.

The progression in index scores evident in the data as stage of study increased was also reflected in the open comments for final year and postgraduate students. The College noted that, as final year students approach the end of their undergraduate experience, their interest turns to requests for more time for clinical placements, internships, real world application/ practical experience and career advice. Students also expressed a desire for increased academic feedback, more advice on study, writing and exam skills.

Many institutions have commented that there is great value in review of free text responses and some have prioritised review and action based on this element of the ISSE. This approach enables institutions to demonstrate to their students that feedback is being acted upon within a relatively short timescale. It also acknowledges that it may take some time to determine and implement appropriate action arising from deeper understanding and detailed analysis of index scores.

“While engagement and outcomes indices provide useful additional analysis and navigation structures, in many cases it is most informative to examine individual items.”

EXAMPLES INTERNATIONALLY

Development of the ISSE has been informed by experiences gained from other jurisdictions where similar surveys have been undertaken. In particular, the US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has been in operation since 2000. Two publications generated by the NSSE project are of particular relevance and are titled "Lessons from the Field". The following limited extracts are taken from the 2009 publication⁴. They provide an insight into how some US institutions are addressing survey-related issues several years after its adoption. These selected examples are not intended to reflect the breadth of activities being undertaken in the US but they provide a context for appreciating the extent to which Irish institutions have already engaged with the ISSE and resulting data. The following examples may also prompt further consideration. Readers with a particular interest are advised to reference the original publications. In addition, the NSSE Institute for Effective Educational Practice maintains a set of online resources on how institutions use NSSE.⁵

Pace University

Pace University has participated annually in NSSE since 2002. Results have been shared extensively with the Board of Trustees, Presidents' Council, and senior administrative councils. The Provost's office has placed special emphasis on sharing results with faculty and the entire university community. NSSE results have not only been shared, but have been acted on and incorporated into various institutional assessments. Very early on, the Office of Planning, Assessment, and Institutional Research along with the University Assessment Committee teamed up with the Centre for Faculty Development and the Centre for Teaching, Learning, and Technology to present Faculty Development Days to review NSSE results. The programs prompted discussion among faculty concerning NSSE Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practice such as Academic Challenge, Active and Collaborative Learning, and Student- Faculty Interaction. Best practices were also shared.

In addition to sharing NSSE data with the various administrative councils, individual deans and

department heads requested presentations on the results for their department faculty and staff. Each year, interest in "how we are doing" grows within the institution. Several NSSE items helped assess Pace's progress in achieving specific goals of its strategic plan.

Viterbo University

Faculty members have increased the use of active learning strategies and technologies to create a learner-centred classroom. Faculty participated in intensive active learning workshops during university in-service and out-service weeks from 2004 to 2008. All had access to a "Coach" who was trained in active learning teaching strategies and who reviewed faculty projects, observed their teaching, and finally evaluated the faculty member's practice. Faculty submitted progress reports to the Director and Coaches. NSSE results from both 2006 and 2007 reinforce the effectiveness of active learning strategies at Viterbo—students' responses indicated they learn more when they are intensely involved in their education, asked to think about what they are learning in different settings, and collaborate with faculty and other students on projects.

Hastings College

For decades, Hastings College has been telling potential students that its students are engaged, they learn, and they are satisfied. Faculty and administrators at the institution felt confident in this statement based on personal feedback from students but, until recently, there had been no concrete evidence to support their assertions. In 2006, Hastings decided to adopt a systematic approach to measuring student outcomes to validate these claims. Participation in NSSE was chosen as a key component of this assessment approach.

To encourage survey participation, the President signed the NSSE e-mail invitation that asked students to respond to the NSSE request to participate. This personalized approach worked well and the school had a 75% participation rate. Such a high response rate bolstered the college's confidence in its NSSE data since it suggested the results were closely representative of the total student population. Upon receipt of 2007 NSSE data, the Vice President of

4. http://nsse.iub.edu/pdf/Lessons_from_the_Field_2009.pdf

5. <http://nsse.iub.edu/html/howInstitutionsUseNSSE.cfm>

"The quality of data from the ISSE is much higher than from some of our existing surveys. It has great potential value to our institution over time."



Academic Affairs and other college administrators were pleased to find that the results “confirmed what they already knew.” High benchmark scores and positive growth in almost all areas in both first-year and senior results confirmed that students were actively engaged in their education.

Hastings College had administered surveys in the past but their use was sporadic. However, the college is now committed to adopting assessment strategies that provide useful data for accreditation and dissemination to external groups. Hastings also wanted a plan that it could use for internal assessment. As a small campus in rural Nebraska, student scores on diversity-related items on the NSSE survey were not as high as those involved in assessment had hoped, so Hastings drilled down to specific item responses to determine which areas needed improvement. By using NSSE results to target specific diversity needs, Hastings was able to implement new programs to improve these areas and to encourage more interaction among students from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. Campus administrators share NSSE results, along with those of other assessment instruments, with all new students in a simple one-page overview. Finally, students’ responses to NSSE survey items are posted on the Hastings Web site and accessed through a prominent link on the home page.

University of Tulsa

The Associate Vice-President for Academic Affairs uses local NSSE data and NSSE benchmark data for broad comparisons. When carrying out analysis of specific areas, she frequently uses disaggregated raw data. For example, the university prides itself on the quality of relationships between students and faculty. Using student responses from selected NSSE items, the vice-provost was able to present to the Dean’s Council a revealing look at student-faculty interaction on campus. Responsibilities for assessment have moved from the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs to the Director of University Assessment over the past year. University Assessment hopes to collaborate with a faculty member in each college who will serve as a champion for helping their colleagues understand the importance and usefulness of NSSE data for analysis at the college level.

University of North Carolina, Wilmington

The School of Education at UNCW has used NSSE data to develop summary reports that compare student engagement results in individual departments with all other students at the university. NSSE data on diversity have also been made available to the School Diversity Committee. These data were used as part of the basis for discussions in the diversity committee that led to the planning and implementation of a diversity showcase. By combining and averaging three years of NSSE results, academic departments with smaller majors had additional respondents which provided more reliable measures. These reports, organized around the five NSSE benchmarks, offered descriptive summaries and item level frequencies for first-year and senior students. While NSSE findings are becoming more integrated in the decision making process, the response rate seems to be an obstacle to overcome for academic units like the School of Education.

Wittenberg University

A challenge Wittenberg faced was encouraging faculty investment in the student engagement concept. Leaders of the student engagement committee carefully chose faculty representatives from across the campus who had a strong commitment to students and to service. As they began to understand that student engagement was rooted in academia, the selected faculty members became more invested in the charge of the committee. Faculty then carried out a useful exercise to identify functional areas of the institution that helped to strengthen and promote student success. They talked with students, faculty peers, and administrators about these areas to further promote understanding of the concept of student engagement. These discussions were felt to increase commitment to student engagement among faculty, administrators and students at Wittenberg.

Chapter Four

REFLECTIONS ON EMERGING PRACTICE

Development and implementation of the ISSE has been rapid because of the effective national collaboration between national agencies, institutions and students representatives in the relatively complex context of the current higher education environment. The report on implementation of the national pilot of the Irish Survey of Student Engagement was published in December 2013. Fieldwork for the 2014 survey took place in February and March leading to institutions receiving their individual results during the summer. The report of national results from 2014 was published in November 2014.

In comparison to the equivalent key milestones for the 2013 national pilot, the shorter time between fieldwork and publication of national results in 2014 should prove beneficial to all partners. Equally, the longer period between publication of the 2014 report and the start of 2015 fieldwork should increase opportunities for staff and students to engage with the ISSE and encourage greater participation in its next iteration.

It is acknowledged that implementation of the ISSE remains at a relatively early stage of development and that, if it is to achieve the objective of providing a new and valuable source of information, it will take some time for institutions to become familiar with the instrument, to judge the accuracy and reliability of the resulting data and to evaluate its value relative to datasets that are currently used.

Nevertheless, this report provides evidence of actions being taken by Irish higher education institutions to provide feedback to students and to staff, and indicates some of the potential uses of ISSE data that have already been identified. As noted in the 'results from 2014' report, individual institutions already utilise a range of other information sources to reflect on the experiences of their students. Implementation of the ISSE is designed to complement existing activities. From this perspective, it appears that there are a number of common features of emerging practice.

A photograph of three students walking through a hallway with a series of arches. The student on the left is a young woman with blonde hair, wearing a pink t-shirt with a graphic and black cargo pants. The student in the middle is a young man with short brown hair, wearing a light blue sweater and blue jeans, carrying a dark bag. The student on the right is a young woman with brown hair, wearing a red hoodie with a circular logo and blue jeans. They are all smiling and looking towards each other. The hallway has a warm, orange-toned light and a tiled floor.

“The greatest incentive for students to participate is to know that their feedback is being listened to and that appropriate action will follow.”

Reflections on emerging practice continued

- Information sessions for Academic Council, other senior groups
- Faculty / school – level reports of emerging results or headlines from data
- Feedback to student union officers
- Feedback to the general student and staff populations

There are a number of examples of institutions embedding ISSE within academic and quality enhancement structures, for example:

- As a standing item on the agenda of the key committees such as Academic Council or, in DCU's case, its Education and Quality Promotion Committees
- As a key information source for institution-wide decisions e.g., the DIT annual monitoring process considers a theme identified as important by Academic Council, such as feedback, and ISSE data can be used as an information source, alongside others, to inform this discussion
- As a resource to identify institutional priority areas within teaching, learning and assessment strategy

Feedback to students' union officers and to the wider student body forms an important element of encouraging participation in, and understanding of, the ISSE. Greater value can be derived at institutional level with a high number of respondents as this increases confidence in the data. This enables an institution to analyse the experiences of particular subgroups of the local student population. One of the factors contributing to the development of the ISSE is the perception from students that feedback may not always be acted upon. The greatest incentive for students to participate in any survey is to know what feedback has been received in previous years and what action has resulted from this feedback.

Feedback to staff management groups (such as Academic Council, heads of faculty / school, executive) provides an important opportunity to demonstrate to key leaders and managers the potential value of the data by providing an evidence base to support or challenge perceptions, to highlight areas that may be of particular interest, and to help to focus attention on specific elements of the overall survey such as indices or questions that relate to issues already under discussion. A number of institutions have piloted

faculty-level reports whereby particular leaders can begin to explore ISSE data for their faculty relative to data at institutional-level. It is appropriate to include a word of caution here – discussion at this level of data undoubtedly reflects the greatest potential value of the data but it is important that overall sample size and data validity are taken into account. Nevertheless, experience from NSSE and AUSSE, as well as emerging evidence from the ISSE, indicates that greatest variation in data is present within institutions rather than between institutions.

Given that the ISSE is a new development, it is particularly important to actively promote its value and potential benefits to a greater number of students and staff. It is evident that institutions have achieved greatest interest where there is active visible involvement of senior personnel and where this translates into effective and focussed feedback to students and to staff. Institutions should ensure that there is an appropriate focus on positive findings as well as issues to be addressed.

THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

Active support from the Union of Students in Ireland is an important element of the collaborative national partnership structure developed to implement ISSE.



Local partnership between institutions and students is key to ensuring that participation rates increase sufficiently to realise the value of the ISSE data (for all parties) and that students appreciate that 'their' institution is committed to acting appropriately on survey findings. At local level, class representatives can and should play a key role in disseminating information of the ISSE and in promoting participation. Students' Union Education Officers (and others) may adopt important coordination and liaison roles to encourage engagement with the survey from staff and students. This report, and feedback and discussion of local results, should demonstrate that institutions are actively engaging with the data and that there are many positive findings as well as some areas for improvement. Such discussions should acknowledge that areas for improvement can be complex and may take time to address in the most appropriate manner. The role of ISSE data as a rich and comprehensive data source should increasingly inform such reflections.

Chapter Five

NEXT STEPS

As institutions begin to integrate analysis and discussion of ISSE data over the next survey iterations, it is appropriate to identify some questions for further consideration over time.

Sharing of ISSE data at institutional level

- Who should be informed of key ISSE findings? When?
- What capacity exists to undertake informed analysis and interpretation of ISSE data? How might this be strengthened (if necessary)?
- Taking account of additional data cleaning as appropriate, which groups of staff and students should have access to the prepared reports or the underlying data or data relating to specific questions?
- What are the issues relating to sharing data (voluntarily and confidentially) between collaborating institutions?



When ISSE has become better understood and established, what impact can be expected for 'our' institution?

