

Considering the impact of StudentSurvey.ie Nationally and Internationally after Nine Years of the Survey.

Siobhán Nic Fhlannchadha¹

Sue Hackett,² David Denieffe,³ Karena Maguire,² Maura McGinn,⁴ Frances O'Connell,⁵ Megan O'Connor,⁶ Sean O'Reilly,⁷ Vivienne Patterson,⁸ Patrick Ryan,⁹ Nora Trench Bowles.¹⁰

¹ StudentSurvey.ie siobhan@studentsurvey.ie,

² Quality and Qualifications Ireland, ³ Institute of Technology Carlow, ⁴ University College Dublin, ⁵ Technological University of the Shannon, ⁶ Union of Students in Ireland, ⁷ Technological Higher Education Association, ⁸ Higher Education Authority, ⁹ University of Limerick, ¹⁰ Irish Universities Association.

Abstract.

In this short article, the StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group offers some observations about the development of the Irish Survey of Student Engagement since its inception in 2012. The article also considers what impact means for StudentSurvey.ie, before discussing some of the ways in which the results of StudentSurvey.ie (and PGR StudentSurvey.ie) have had impact nationally and internationally. One way is the inclusion of StudentSurvey.ie in national quality assurance reviews, which has highlighted some of the opportunities and challenges in demonstrating the impact of StudentSurvey.ie within participating institutions. The publication of this article coincides with the publication of the StudentSurvey.ie Trend Analysis Research 2016-2021, which is briefly discussed. Some final remarks are offered.

Keywords: Higher education; Student engagement; Survey.

1. The path so far.

StudentSurvey.ie¹ and PGR StudentSurvey.ie² have become established features of the higher

¹ The Irish Survey of Student Engagement; Suirbhé na hÉireann ar Rannpháirtíocht na Mac Léinn.

² The Irish Survey of Student Engagement for Postgraduate Research Students; Suirbhé na hÉireann

education landscape in Ireland since their development in 2013 and 2018 (respectively). Development and implementation of StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie are driven by the intention to inform, support, and encourage enhancement discussions and activities throughout institutions, and to inform national policy. As we look to the future, focus shifts to making greater strides in achieving accessible, strong, and responsive structures to ensure that action is taken promptly in relation to students' experiences and concerns.

The surveys are comprehensive, and they seek to explore many aspects of the experiences of students in higher education. Greatest benefit is realised when those exploring the data, including students and staff, have a deep understanding of the local context. The StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie datasets are valuable components of the data sources available to higher education institutions, which are used in varying and increasingly sophisticated ways to identify good practice and plan for enhancement. 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, and the StudentSurvey.ie Discussion Paper on Evidencing Value through Impact (Nic Fhlannchadha & Hackett, 2020) introduced some concepts of impact and generated questions and ideas.

1.1 What does impact mean for the results of StudentSurvey.ie?

Fundamentally, impact 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. 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 world*' 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? In having this focus, what unexpected impacts have also emerged which have required or benefited from a strategic or procedural review and change?

It can be difficult to capture the real impact of the survey results on the institution and on the student experience. Evidence needs to be gathered over time, collected from a variety of

sources, of which the core may be qualitative data represented by student feedback. However, it is critically important. Without a means of capturing and sustaining the impacts (both intended and possibly unintended), the role of the surveys may not be considered entirely fulfilled. Whereas the surveys traditionally are regarded as means of collating quantitative data, there have been developments recently where the qualitative data has been highlighted in specific thematic reports and been seen to be very valuable.

1.2 Impact of StudentSurvey.ie nationally and internationally.

At sectoral level, there is an increasing number of examples of effective uses of StudentSurvey.ie data. The Higher Education Authority (HEA) engages in a process of strategy and performance dialogue with the higher education institutions in order to improve system and institutional performance, enhance system accountability, and enable the HEA to manage system risks. Performance compacts are agreed between individual HEIs and the HEA. The compacts reflect the individual missions, capacities, strengths and priorities of each institution and explain how they will contribute to regional, national and system objectives, as set out in the System Performance Framework 2018-2020. StudentSurvey.ie results are referred to when reviewing performance within these compacts and are one of the sources of information presented to the dialogue by HEIs which inform future direction.

All participating higher education institutions, including those represented and supported in this endeavour by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), are committed to collecting, analysing, understanding, and acting on the data generated by StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie. Resulting positive impacts on the student experience can range from incremental improvements, for example at the heart of the teaching and learning experience at programme level, to large-scale changes highly visible at an institutional level. The data sharing agreement between THEA and the higher education institutions it represents has facilitated sectoral analysis of data by THEA. A series of short reports on specific topics is ongoing, which provide valuable data to the institutions, inform their own analyses and allow for strategic consideration of sectoral results by those in the technological higher education sector.

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) strongly encourages innovative approaches and continued collaboration between institutions and Students' Unions in the promotion of the survey. The organisation also emphasises the integration of successful partnership into the

development of institutions, with students being fully and actively engaged in closing the feedback loop, using the existing committees and structures. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) senior executive sit on the StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group. The inclusion of StudentSurvey.ie results in the quality assurance processes of QQI is ongoing and considered further below.

The National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) and StudentSurvey.ie collaborated in 2020-2021 to create an online training for class reps in how to promote StudentSurvey.ie and be involved in the dissemination of the results. The StudentSurvey.ie Project Manager sits on the NStEP Advisory Group. StudentSurvey.ie was a partner organisation in the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning Next Steps project as part of the VITAL Week (Valuing Ireland's Teaching and Learning) 2021. StudentSurvey.ie and the National Forum have previously collaborated to offer discipline-specific data analysis workshops for staff in participating institutions in 2018. An example of cross-institutional collaboration in the use of the StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie data by Association of Higher Education Careers Services (AHECS) Postgraduate Research Students Task Group (Lardner et al, 2020) is available [here](#).

Finally, in the last year, the results of StudentSurvey.ie and PGR StudentSurvey.ie have fed into strategies and policies such as the work of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's Tertiary Education COVID-19 Steering Group, the consultation on the new National Research and Innovation Strategy 2021-27 and on the new International Education Strategy for Ireland. The StudentSurvey.ie Interim Results Bulletin 2021 (StudentSurvey.ie, 2021a) is an example of where StudentSurvey.ie brought student voices to the heart of national policy and decision-making at a time when the sector was preparing for the 2021/2022 academic year. The Interim Results Bulletin was presented to key sectoral and national stakeholders at this critical juncture. The results of PGR StudentSurvey.ie have already been reflected in international research and policy, such as the EUA report on the implementation of the National Framework for Doctoral Education in Ireland (Sursock, Fuller, Michalik & Peterbauer, 2021).

Building on this international focus and relevance of StudentSurvey.ie, the StudentSurvey.ie management has been consulted on the review of the National Student Survey in the UK and participated in a significant international collaboration which will culminate in the publication of Global Student Engagement (Coates, Xi, Shi & Guo, in press). Results from StudentSurvey.ie

and PGR StudentSurvey.ie have been published in journals such as Internationalisation of Higher Education and presented at conferences such as The European Higher Education Society Forum 2021.

1.3 Inclusion of StudentSurvey.ie in national quality assurance review – towards measuring the impact of StudentSurvey.ie within participating institutions.

The QQI Annual Quality Review (AQR) template completed each year by the higher education institutions refers to StudentSurvey.ie as an indicative area in respect of which institutions may wish to provide evidence of impact and enhancements. The reference in the AQR report template to StudentSurvey.ie is in Part B, Section 2.0 – IQA System Enhancement & Impacts under ‘*Information & Data Management*’.

The QQI (2020) Insight: Quality in Higher Education states that

‘... these externally operated surveys such as StudentSurvey.ie... and Graduate Outcomes Survey and First Destinations Survey – provide valuable sources of data for institutions, with many institutions endeavouring to increase response rates to ensure as reliable a sample as possible to allow for more accurate conclusions, as well as to facilitate benchmarking against peer institutions.’

In 2020, the information included in the AQRs tended to focus primarily on efforts to raise their institutional student response rate to the StudentSurvey.ie. For example, one HEI reported its highest response rate to the survey to date with nearly 70% of students completing the 2019 survey. Another reported on benchmarking analyses carried out to see how the HEI was performing against others nationally in particular targeted areas. Generally, there was little comment on any analysis of how the data had had, or was projected to have, an actual, ongoing and sustained impact on the institution. The lack of specific information on impact does not mean that impact is not happening, but rather, without requesting this explicitly, reporting of analyses of the impact of the survey data may not be understood to be a focus here.

1.4 The StudentSurvey.ie Trends Over Time Research 2016-2021.

The ongoing and sustained impact of the results of StudentSurvey.ie on participating institutions features centrally in the StudentSurvey.ie Trends Over Time Research 2016-2021. In this research, six years of student feedback are represented in text, images, and interactive

dashboards. The use of the same questions every year allows for longitudinal comparison across the six years to explore change, if any, in students' perception of their experience and engagement with their institution. The StudentSurvey.ie Trends Over Time Research 2016-2021 aims to provide insights into the progress of student engagement from 2016 to 2021. In addition to the presentation of quantitative data over the six years, these insights will be gleaned from case studies from the participating institutions, demonstrating the impact the results of StudentSurvey.ie have had over the six years. The research also aims to provide participating higher education institutions with a national benchmark against which to compare their own progress in addressing student feedback and enhancing the student experience. Finally, international comparator data are included to provide participating higher education institutions with international context with which they may reflect on their own results.

2. Final remarks.

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”.

When using StudentSurvey.ie data to develop policy and decision-making procedures, clarity is needed about how the conclusions 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 enable growth and foster development into the institution's best version of itself.

StudentSurvey.ie represents a rich and ever-growing source 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 adopt an approach to impact identification, evaluation and cultivation which will mean the learner is firmly situated at the centre of decision-making, and their experiences and feedback drive the development of the institution.

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