

## **Hindsight is 20/20 Vision: What International Students Wished They Had Known Before Coming to Live and Learn in Ireland**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article reports on a survey (n=573) of international students who were attending one of a group of five higher education institutes (HEIs) in the south of Ireland. This study sought to identify what knowledge these students had about their host country before coming to Ireland. In this study, we also attempted to identify what aspects of living and learning in Ireland these students wished they had known about before they left their home countries. Finally, we discuss the types of academic, socio-cultural and practical resources that both welcoming colleges and international students should consider prioritising before departure, so as to truly help the transition from a home to host country.*

**Keywords:** Ireland, higher education, acculturation, social, practical, academic, culture

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Ireland's Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) have quickly adapted to the opportunities of international education through inward student migration. Between 2000 and 2011, the number of international students doubled, with almost 4.5 million tertiary students enrolled outside their country of citizenship (OECD, 2013). In 2012, it was estimated that the international education sector was worth €1 billion to the Irish economy (Finn & O'Connell, 2012). According to the Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA), in 2015/16, there were 20,597 full-time students in HEA funded institutes in Ireland whose domiciliary of origin was not Ireland (HEA, 2016), which is up from 9,185 in 2012/13 (HEA, 2013). In 2014/15, the year of this study, that figure was 18,243, of who 619 were from Africa, 4,632 were from North America, 1,078 were from South America, 7,087 were from Asia, 3,938 were from Europe EU, 355 were from Europe non EU, 101 were from Oceania and 433 were from Other/Not Applicable (HEA, 2015). With regard to EU students, Ireland received 6,622 students under the Erasmus programme in 2013/2014, up from 5,073 in 2009/10 (European Commission, 2016). In 2013/14, the top three countries of origin of Erasmus students coming to Ireland were France, Spain and the UK, and the top three HEIs that Erasmus students attended were University College Dublin, University College Cork and University of Limerick (European Commission, 2016). As a consequence of the rise in international students coming to Ireland, it is more important than ever for Irish HEIs

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to ascertain and document the experiences of incoming international students in order to provide as enjoyable and meaningful an experience as possible.

In 2014, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (<http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/>) put out a call for collaborative projects on transitions in higher education (HE). The Higher Education Authority's (HEA) Southern Cluster—University College Cork (UCC); Institute of Technology, Tralee (ITT); Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT), Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) and Institute of Technology, Carlow (ITC)—secured funding under this call for a project to develop a suite of online interactive learning objects to assist incoming international students make the transition into the Irish HE system. The development of the units was informed by a literature review and an online survey across the five institutions (n=573) to gather the views and experiences of international students. This paper uses the data from that survey to discuss the issues for international students transitioning into HE in Ireland and the possible implications for the Irish HE system.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The Irish government has consciously courted international students for some time: the International Education Board of Ireland was established in 1992; Immigration legislation was passed in 1999, 2003 and 2004; and an Education Delegation went to China in 2005, which was the biggest ever to leave Ireland and was led by then Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) Mr. Bertie Ahearn. At that time, Ireland was perceived as a leader in globalisation and was ranked top as the most globalized country in the world by A.T. Kearney/Foreign Policy Globalization Index (Measuring Globalization, 2004).

In the last fifteen years, Ireland has witnessed considerable economic and social change, along with an unprecedented rise in the number of immigrants, both academic and economic, to cities and towns, propelled by Ireland's economic success. In the five-year period from 2011 to 2016, the number of non-Irish persons rose from over 557,000 to over 593,000 people out of a total population of 4.67 million people (Central Statistics Office, 2016). While the discourse on migration has veered away from looking solely at Ireland's migrants abroad, to looking at the new migrants in Ireland, this new public discourse tends to be largely negative and there remains an interminable void between the inclusion of immigrants into the productive system and their integration into social fabric (Ceccagno, 2003). It has also been noted that international students in Ireland can be susceptible to the challenges experienced by other migrants (O'Connor, 2017).

While it should be noted that there have been reports of overwhelmingly positive experiences by international students coming to Ireland, (Irish Council for International Students/Union of Students in Ireland 2012; O'Reilly et al., 2015). [focus on Irish case instead of a general international student body in other countries]

Wu, Garza and Guzman (2015) argue that in order for international students to maximise their educational experience in another country, they will face a range of challenges that go beyond the purely academic issues; the “new community is the first lesson they have to deal with” (Wu et al., 2015, p. 3). Curriculum and assessments will initially take a back seat to the more prosaic “reality of needing to find places to live and finding banks to deposit and withdraw money and transportation by finding buses or buying cars to move around and applying for credits cards” (Wu et al., 2015, p. 3). Creating friendships appears to be an

important part of addressing all acculturation stressors. Berry (2005) reports that immigrants who follow an integration strategy are less stressed and reach higher levels of adaptation than those who chose marginalisation. While the value of close family and friends is significant across the spectrum of the student body, it would appear that social connectedness through friendships becomes all the more important for international students from interdependent cultures (Belford, 2017).

Compounding the problem of establishing social connectedness, international students have been found to underuse counselling services, often perceiving such services with a degree of stigma. In a comparative study, Ra (2017) found that international students were far less likely to use psychological services than domestic students. Poyrazli (2015) notes that international students will often use a number of other sources of help and support prior to accessing official counselling services, preferring to access help and advice from professors, medical professionals or friends. Moreover, an action research study by Onabule & Boes (2013) found significant differences in how international students perceive and understand counselling services compared to those who define the policies and manage the student services programs.

What appears to have emerged from this brief literature review is that Ireland has continued to enjoy an increase in the number of international students coming to its shores. Such students have reported positive experiences, but may also be encountering considerable social, cultural and educational challenges. It would also appear that key to addressing those challenges is increased support for the socialisation of international students but that the support needs to be reflective of what the students need rather than what they are perceived to need.

## **METHOD**

In this paper, we drew data on international student populations from the five colleges that comprise the HEA's southern cluster. It should be acknowledged that there are a number of definitions (e.g. OECD, 2013) of what constitutes an international student. However, as this is a study of international students in Ireland, the Irish Department of Education and Skills definition of an international student was employed; [any person] "normally domiciled outside the jurisdiction who have come to Ireland specifically to undertake a programme of education" (Department of Education and Skills, 2010, p. 30). It should be noted that in 2016, the department revealed a new international education strategy, where it defined international students as "those that are studying full-time that have a domicile of origin outside of Ireland" (Department of Education and Skills, 2016, p. 50). Ethical approval was sought and granted from the research ethics committees of each of the five institutions. Participation was entirely voluntary, with participants given assurances of confidentiality, anonymity and the safe and appropriate storage of data. An online survey was used to collect data, in this case a proprietary version of Survey Monkey. The design and tone of the questionnaire was informed by issues raised from the literature review process and from the collective experience of the project team that drew on lecturing, management and international officer roles. The questionnaire was slightly modified following a pilot distribution of the survey to approximately 30 international students. The final design incorporated four open ended questions and thirteen closed questions that focussed on academic issues, practical issues and social/cultural issues. An invitation to participate was distributed via email by the international office in each college to class groups that were identified as meeting the inclusion criteria. The response to the survey was incentivised with an invitation to enter into a draw on completing the survey to win one of five

€50 vouchers (one per HEI). Of the 576 who took the survey, 133 (23%) entered the draw for the vouchers.

## FINDINGS

Given that UCC is the biggest college with over two thousand international students it is not surprising that the majority of respondents were from UCC. However, the low response rate from WIT is indicative of the distribution and access to students identified in the previous section. Nonetheless, the data, while not necessarily representative in terms of proportionality across the institutions, does nonetheless represent the views of nearly six hundred students from across the region, with particularly high levels of representation in from Carlow, Cork and Tralee Institutes of Technology and an overall participation rate of 16% of the international student body across the region.

*Table 1. Respondents by attending HEI.*

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Total Number of Students (FT/PT)</b>	<b>Number of International Students*</b>	<b>Survey Respondents</b>	<b>% of Int. Student Body</b>
Institute of Technology, Carlow	6,820	296	110	37%
Cork Institute of Technology	10,519	296	69	23%
Institute of Technology, Tralee	2,890	263	69	26%
University College Cork	19,521	2290	278	12%
Waterford Institute of Technology	7,792	439	43	10%
Southern Cluster Total	47,542	3584	569	16%

\*(Students 2015/16 Domiciliary not the island of Ireland, HEA 2016)

EU students were reduced to one category; however, a number of the EU respondents also used the open response facility as well as the EU button to indicate their home country (France 22; Spain 8 and Germany 7 were the three highest of the EU). Table 2 provides a list of the top ten home countries/regions of the respondents.

There was a wide geographical spread amongst the 85 who indicated ‘other’ as their home country; these included (numbers in brackets): Singapore (6); Nigeria (3); Mexico (2); Sri Lanka (2); Tunisia (2) and Indonesia (2). Single number respondents included: Trinidad & Tobago; Qatar, New Zealand, Iran, Mauritius, South Africa, Norway, Maldives, South Korea and Iraq.

Table 3 provides a breakdown in terms of age and gender distribution. As can be seen, there was a 60/40% split in terms of female to male representation with a propensity towards younger students. While we have consistently used the term international student, we are very aware that they are not a homogenous group. As previously indicated, respondents came from many countries around the world. Likewise, there are was a range of options through which

students came to study in the region, which are illustrated in Table 3. As can be seen from table four, the majority of students were undertaking an element of a degree; either undertaking one semester or one academic year (two semesters). That said, of the 560 who answered to the question, 130 or 23% of the respondents were undertaking a full degree.

*Table 2.* Respondents by country of origin.

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<b>Country/Region</b>	<b>Survey Respondents</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
Other	17%	85
EU Country	42.2%	210
Brazil	13.9%	69
United States	11.2%	56
Malaysia	10.6%	53
China	6.4%	32
Canada	4.6%	23
India	3.6%	18
Saudi Arabia	3.2%	16
Oman	2.6%	13

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*Table 3.* Respondents by program of study.

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<b>Study Arrangement</b>	<b><i>n</i></b>
Visiting EU Student Full Academic Year or One Semester	241
Full Undergraduate Full Degree EU	48
Visiting Non - EU Student Full Academic Year or One Semester	118
English Language or Foundation Programme	12
Masters/PhD	59
Full Undergraduate Full Degree Non-EU	82
Other	14

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Language ability (or indeed inability) is one of the key elements to inclusion and participation, particularly so in the academic arena where a relatively high level of English language is required. For instance, in order to participate in undergraduate programs an IELTS (or equivalent) English language level of 5.5 while for graduate programs the required level is higher at 6.0 or in some cases 6.5. Respondents were first asked to indicate if they were native English speakers. Of the 567 who answered the question, 79% said they were non-native speakers (NNS) whilst 21% said that they were native English speakers; with the majority coming from the USA at 52% of the ‘yes’ respondents followed by Canada at 21%. The next question asked the respondents to indicate the level of English ability that they had been assessed at prior to coming to Ireland across three bands; in all, 391 responded to this question

either by selecting the closed question option or by writing open responses, which were subsequently categorised (approximately 9 % of answers were too vague to be categorised).

*Table 4.* Respondents by level of English.

<b>Language Test Bands</b>	<b>% of respondents (n = 391)</b>
IELTS 5.5; or equivalent scores for ETAPP; Cambridge ESOL; TIE; Council of Europe; TOEFL Paper Based Test; TOEFL Computer Based Test; TOEFL, TOEIC, Internet Based Test; Vitnemal	18%
IELTS 6.0; or equivalent scores for ETAPP; Cambridge ESOL; TIE; Council of Europe; TOEFL Paper Based Test; TOEFL Computer Based Test; TOEFL, TOEIC, Internet Based Test; Vitnemal	23%
IELTS $\geq$ 6.5; or equivalent scores for ETAPP; Cambridge ESOL; TIE; Council of Europe; TOEFL Paper Based Test; TOEFL Computer Based Test; TOEFL, TOEIC, Internet Based Test; Vitnemal	41%

*Table 5.* Sources of information about Ireland prior to arrival.

<b>Information Source</b>	<b>Importance Rating</b>
The Internet (Websites etc.)	3.5
Your Home College International Officer	3.93
Friends that had visited Ireland	4.24
Friends that had studied in Ireland	4.35
An International education 'fair'	5.16
Social Media	5.28
Parent/Family Recommendation	6.76
Agent	6.9
Visiting Lecturer from a linked or partner college	7.28
Visiting International Officer	7.59

The Irish government, individual colleges and their respective representative bodies, the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Technological Higher Education Association Ireland (THEA), devote a lot of time and effort in marketing, promotion and recruitment drives. Therefore, it is useful to understand where prospective international students get their information from. Respondents (n= 483) were asked to rate (using a scale of 1-10; with one being the least important) the sources of information they utilised about living and studying in Ireland prior to their arrival. Despite the role that websites and social media play in modern

society, table 6 clearly shows the importance of the personal touch in providing trusted sources of information.

### **Knowledge and Experiences**

Having a good knowledge about the practical aspects of living in a country can certainly help ameliorate potential difficulties and avoid potential issues that might impact the ability of international students to successfully complete their studies. Therefore, the respondents were asked to self-rate their knowledge with respect to a series of practical matters relating to issues such as health and transport and so on; the responses are presented in table seven.

*Table 6.* Practical knowledge of Ireland prior to arrival.

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<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Very Good Knowledge</b>	<b>Some Knowledge</b>	<b>Little or no Knowledge</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Knowledge of how to set up a bank account	75	168	237	480
Knowledge about the cost of living in Ireland	83	334	64	481
Knowledge about getting accommodation	150	239	89	478
Knowledge about transport	80	239	160	479
Knowledge about setting up utilities (e.g. Gas and Electricity)	25	120	331	476
Knowledge of Immigration policies and procedures	83	185	207	475
Knowledge about working while in Ireland	47	130	301	478
Knowledge about the Irish healthcare system	15	129	334	478
Knowledge about the geography of Ireland	137	263	77	477
Other (Please Specify)				2

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In terms of the practical experiences of living in Ireland, respondents expressed concern about the cost of living. Expense was not just an issue with regard to accommodation but rather extended into most areas of general living in Ireland; food clothing, utilities and printing were all highlighted as being unexpectedly expensive by respondents. The cost of travel within Ireland was also an issue raised by students. From table seven, it appears that accommodation was second in the list of aspects that international students had some or very good knowledge about before coming to Ireland. However, in open responses, international students noted the difficulty with the general availability of accommodation and, specifically, with finding accommodation in Ireland from their home country. Respondents also commented on the difficulty of finding affordable quality accommodation as illustrated by this EU student living

in Cork: “It is really difficult to find a good accommodation if you don't know anybody who can help you. A lot of houses are damp and in bad condition.” Not knowing enough about their rights as tenants and having sufficient protection from landlord abuse was also highlighted. Another issue commented upon was that standard tenancy agreements often did not suit the circumstances of international students; with preference given by landlords to tenants who can sign yearlong tenancy agreements. Given the ubiquity of the internet one might be somewhat surprised that levels of knowledge with regard to important practical issues, such as immigration policies, banking arrangements, healthcare and working were quite low when one would imagine that such information is readily available, however, this would not appear to be the case.

While the practical aspects of living in a country are of course important, having an understanding about the cultural practices and social mores of a society can help ease the transition (Wu et al. 2015). Consequently, we sought to ascertain the students’ levels of prior knowledge regarding a number of social and cultural aspects of Irish life; the findings of which are presented in table eight.

*Table 7. Social and cultural knowledge of Ireland prior to arrival.*

<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Very Good Knowledge</b>	<b>Some Knowledge</b>	<b>Little or no Knowledge</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Knowledge of appropriate ways of greeting Irish people	55	274	153	482
Knowledge of local phrases and accents	20	195	265	480
Knowledge of Irish social settings	38	226	216	480
Knowledge of cultural activities other than pub culture in Ireland	57	232	191	480
Knowledge of culturally appropriate ways of behaving	72	263	144	479
Knowledge of Irish sports	35	182	261	478
Other (Please Specify)				1

Given that intercultural communication incorporates understanding the nuances regarding behaviour and cultural norms, it would appear that many of the students had only a scant level of knowledge regarding many of the areas of Irish life that provide the social glue of society in Ireland.

Table 8 illustrates the responses to a question that focussed on aspects of inclusion and engagement after the respondents had been living in Ireland. Respondents were posed a number of scenarios and asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement.

*Table 8.* Inclusion and engagement after arriving in Ireland.

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Not Applicable</b>
My social network is only with people from my own country	20	79	166	169	5
My social network consists of International student community members only	37	106	199	89	7
My social network includes Irish as well as International students	116	213	81	25	3
My English language ability makes it difficult to be included into Irish social life	19	82	153	158	29
I have found it difficult to buy the correct clothes for me	11	42	134	216	37
I have found it difficult to buy food that I like	28	92	134	170	16
I have found it difficult to find employment	49	82	51	21	234
I am happy with my social network	141	236	51	7	2
I would like more Irish friends	138	229	54	7	11
I am a member of a college sports club	60	96	112	80	91
I am a member of a college society	75	123	113	60	68
I am a member of a sports club in the community	21	34	161	102	118
I am a member of an organisation in the community	27	38	164	93	114

An initial examination of the responses suggests that socialising is not an issue for students, with eighty-six percent selecting agree or strongly agree to the statement “I am happy with my social network.” However, eighty-four percent of respondents also agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I would like more Irish friends.” Forty-five percent of respondents were members of a college society and thirty-six percent of respondents were members of a college sports club. The network of clubs and societies, and their fundamental importance to the college experience in Ireland, is not necessarily replicated in other countries, and many respondents highlighted the unexpectedly positive role that clubs and societies played in them having a positive social experience while in Ireland.

A study of students in a major Irish university by Delaney, Kapteyn & Smith (2008) found that international students “drink significantly less than Irish nationals” (p. 11); the findings of this study allowed us to drill down a little deeper into the implications of drinking practices in Irish colleges. Respondents did highlight the over-reliance on alcohol-related social activities and the extent to which the pub appears to play such a central role in Irish social interaction as noted by this respondent: “Ha ha, if you enjoy going out drinking you will enjoy and appreciate it more here in Ireland” (Botswana student). However, this positive disposition towards pub-based activities were not shared by all, as illustrated by these comments: “What else do people do here other than drink” (Tanzanian student) and “I hope the college can encourage more International students to participate in the social events other than drinking” (Malaysian student).

In contrast to the membership of college societies and sports clubs, only fifteen percent of respondents were members of an organisation in the community and thirteen percent were members of sports club in the community. A possibly surprising aspect that emerged from the survey was the recognition by many respondents that the responsibility for social interaction rests on the international student. Respondents reported that it was important for international students to ‘get involved’ and to make the effort to socialise. One respondent going as far as to make the point to fellow international students that they will be rewarded for their efforts to get involved. While there were, of course, some negative experiences reported, the overwhelming majority of the comments were very positive, with the main attraction of Ireland being the people as illustrated by this comment: “Lovely people and very helpful. - An excellent place for a family to study Master or PhD. - The land of openness” (Kuwaiti student).

The data from the section regarding social networks is particularly interesting, highlighting as it does that, in this instance, the international students’ social networks extend beyond their own co-national groups; both to other nationalities within the international student community but also extending to the host-country network. From an inclusion perspective, McFaul (2016) notes how the makeup of social networks in terms of co-national, multinational or host-country can have a huge bearing (either positive or negative) on the acculturation process. On the face of it, it would appear that many of the international students’ social networks include Irish as well as international students. However, some of the other categories make for less encouraging reading, highlighting low levels of interaction and participation in many aspects of college life. For example, the point about language ability and inclusion is well made by this quote from a student from Oman whose experiences of class involvement were not very positive:

*I wish to have some of Irish friends as an international student we found it difficult for us to start speaking with the Irish student inside the class so we hope that they can understand that, and I wish that they can start talking with us asking us so we can use to start talking with them.*

Given that Ireland likes to portray itself as the land of a hundred thousand welcomes, the quote above coupled with the fact that over 350 respondents said they would like more Irish friends requires some serious consideration for the host country.

This final aspect of the findings highlights the issues raised around academic matters (Table 9), such as assessments and teaching styles. Finn & Darmody (2017) report that the most important factor determining international students’ satisfaction with their study in Ireland was satisfaction with the institution they were studying with.

Respondents reported being surprised that a very good submission might result in a 75% mark in Ireland, when in their home country the same piece of work might well result in a mark in the eighties or nineties as illustrated by this comment from a Canadian student: “Be prepared to get lower grades. Over here, a 70% is considered to be great”.

*Table 9.* View of Irish academic environment.

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither</b>		<b>Not Applicable</b>
				<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Agree nor Disagree</b>	
I find the class atmosphere very different to my home college experience	120	164	55	18	14	9
I like to speak up in class	37	108	142	45	38	9
I like to ask questions in class	40	118	146	29	36	11
I work well in group or practical exercises with Irish students in my class	41	180	61	18	31	48
My college in Ireland provided opportunities to help me settle into college life before I came to Ireland	42	125	114	35	44	18
Some of my lecturers are hard to understand	50	141	111	52	20	6
Adapting to my Irish college's assessments is challenging	40	161	107	37	29	4
I feel under pressure to perform well while I am in Ireland	41	125	133	56	24	0
My college in Ireland has provided opportunities to help me settle into college life since I came to Ireland	93	190	40	18	24	12
The college induction programme was very useful	76	179	45	15	36	25

Following on from the misconceptions around grading is the concern students reported at the volume of work required by assessments, especially in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences disciplines. International students may be used to being assessed using mechanisms where it is possible to get 100%, for example multiple choice questions, and then they come to Ireland where (depending on the subject matter) the assessment approach may be less prescribed. Students coming from many countries reported that they were not used to having to write long essays, which they found quite challenging. From a number of the student comments it would appear that many of the international students are not as exposed to the 'standard' academic essay as Irish students are as illustrated by these comments: "The assessments are really different. You have to write a lot of essays" (Dutch student), and "So many essay type questions". (Botswana student)

This concern is also compounded by the problem that for many international students, English might not be their first language which can be a particularly problematic if the assessment rubric places a lot of emphasis on the quality of language expression. The second issue regarding grades is that students reported concern that the lower grades they received while in Ireland would have an adverse effect on their overall grade point average when they return home.

Along with grading and assessments, the other area of the academic experience that respondents reported concern about was the informality of Irish lectures. While not necessarily seen as a bad thing, this increased informality did cause some concern among international students who would be used to a formal, prescriptive even didactical approach to lecturing. This informality was characterised by one American student in the following terms: "The classes are less formal, less structured, and less serious than I would have been used to" (American Student).

As previously noted, students coming to Ireland bring with them a wide variety of previous experiences and expectations. This can manifest itself in terms of such things as: the level of interaction and participation expected in class, independent workload expectations and the nature and type of assessments. While many people when they travel to another country expect different values and cultures, one might be forgiven for thinking that third level institutions and standards would be somewhat more homogenous. However, as illustrated in table ten, this does not necessarily appear to be the case. For example, three quarters of the 380 respondents agreed that the class atmosphere is different from their home college while 53% of the respondents found it a challenge to adapt to their Irish college's assessment strategy as illustrated by this comment from an EU student: "Irish people don't always realize that everyone's school system is different and therefore might not use same scales, criteria etc. and forgot to mention this to the exchange students". Although, respondents also appeared to acknowledge the value of the effort made by Irish HEIs with the induction programme and opportunities afforded to them to settle into Irish college life.

## DISCUSSION

It is worth considering the implications that this research has in terms of policy and practice, both at a college level and a wider national level; and in keeping with the general thematic character of the study, these areas for consideration are presented in terms of the practical, social and academic aspects of living and studying in Ireland.

## **Practical**

The lack of affordable, quality and dependable accommodation and the cost of living in Ireland in general emerged as the main practical issues facing international students who responded to the survey. The accommodation problem was so widely reported that it would appear to be a national issue that requires a national response. In a submission to the Dáil's (the Irish Parliament) Committee on Housing and Homelessness, the Union of Students of Ireland (USI) called on the Minister for Housing and the committee to create a Student Housing Strategy in consultation with the USI, with long-term solutions, goals and timelines (USI, 2016). The cost of living in Ireland, especially in the cities, was the second biggest practical issue that students wished they knew more about. In 2016, Ireland was seventh highest in the price level indices (PLIs) for total household final consumption expenditure (HFCE) on goods and services (Eurostat, 2017). PLIs offer a comparison of countries' prices relative to the EU average. It would appear that being upfront about the costs of living in Ireland would help better prepare international students for living in Ireland, while a greater effort could be made with international students when they are here to ensure they are getting value for money. A number of Irish HEIs do publish annual Cost of Living Guides ([DIT \(Dublin\)](#) [UCD \(Dublin\)](#) [UCC \(Cork\)](#) [NUI Galway](#) and [University of Limerick](#)). It could become the case that such guides are published annually as a standard item on all Irish HEI websites. When it comes to the remaining practical issues that international students reported on—the demands of the Irish weather, the transports system, working in Ireland, setting up a utility bill—what emerged from the survey was that no detail is too small and that it would be amiss of HEIs to assume that existing information about practical issues is sufficiently meeting the needs of international students.

## **Social**

The literature review above highlighted the importance of a positive social experience for international students. Such efforts suggest that international officers in Irish HEIs are aware that they cannot rely on the idea that social interaction will emerge naturally or iteratively. The importance of the Students' Union in driving social interaction was recognised by respondents, as was the value of the student clubs and societies. There are a number of efforts being made in HEIs across Ireland to lessen the dependence on alcohol for a social experience, which need to be encouraged. That said, it should be acknowledged that HEIs are taking greater steps to encourage and facilitate better health and wellbeing including responses to alcohol consumption. Similarly, the Union of Students in Ireland (USI, 2015) and local college student unions have undertaken a range of initiatives that promote a sensible approach to alcohol, the website Alcohol and Mental Health (<http://mentaldrinking.ie/>) being one such example. The importance of having a positive social experience for international students cannot be underestimated. Given the recognised value of the international officers, the students' union and clubs of societies in promoting a positive social experience for international students, it is important that HEIs and the HEA properly promote and resource these activities, which appear crucial to ensuring that international students continue to see Ireland as a socially attractive destination. It would appear from the responses to membership of community-based organisations that there may be the potential for efforts to improve social interaction between the community outside the HEI and international students.

## Academic

Respondents have indicated that they found a difference between the academic environments at home and in Ireland, as reported in their view of assessments, workload and class environment. This is an illustration of the different expectations placed on education in different cultures. Such a contrast to prior academic experience can be quite disconcerting for the students and result in undermining their confidence. These misconceptions can be addressed by better informing international students before they leave their home countries about the academic environment they are entering. There is also the potential for lecturers in Irish HEIs to take into consideration the different learning needs of their student cohort and ensure that the assessment strategy is not too dependent on an approach that might disadvantage a number of students in their group, including international students. Similarly, lecturers would also need to be aware of the different class environments that their students are coming from, which might help prepare lecturers for concerns from their international students about the changed class environment. Considering the number of times that grading differences was highlighted as an issue, it would certainly seem incumbent on HEIs to consider the impact that a 'lower' score might have on a returning international student's grade point average (GPA). A student whose average scores may be in the 80s or 90s might find it a little difficult to convince their home institution that a 72% is really a very high grade in Ireland. In turn, some international students may be dissuaded from coming to Irish HEIs unless a college has a conversion arrangement. Given the breadth and depth of some of the academic differences that international students encounter on coming to Ireland, there may be value in providing ongoing academic and support modules for incoming international students to complement the inductions and opportunities to settle in that were positively responded to in the survey. As noted by O'Reilly et al. (2013, p. 369), there is certainly merit in providing cultural awareness training for staff who have both "primary (i.e., international office staff, chaplaincy) and secondary contact (e.g., technical support and administrative staff)" as a way of helping both staff and students maximise the potential for both parties.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the survey would seem to indicate that the majority of international students are happy with their experience of living and learning in Ireland. The stereotype of the garrulous friendly Irish would seem to be borne out (to varying degrees) with the Irish people themselves cited as being the most positive aspect of living in Ireland. Additionally, the work of the international offices in the five colleges would appear to be a positive aspect of the Irish experience. That said, if there is one area for colleges to consider it is that there appears to be a degree difference between what a large number of international students expect and what they receive in terms of grades and the possible implications this may have when they return to their home institutions. The problem of the availability of suitable student accommodation is a problem that besets many students in Ireland. However, when people's English language ability and knowledge of the housing market is somewhat limited, the problem of sourcing housing can be exasperated. Given the importance of accommodation to a successful transition into any society, the seriousness of this issue can hardly be overstated. Supporting any transition in or out of education can be difficult with a huge range of factors to be considered if the student is to be supported to the best of one's ability. It is apparent that making a successful transition into an

academic setting relies on a range of factors in addition to what happens within the college walls. These factors include the social and practical aspects of living in a country. Living and learning in a new country requires the development of a range of skills and knowledge that goes beyond simply acquiring the subject matter of the program being undertaken. For a small, open English speaking economy like Ireland, the international student sector affords huge financial, reputational and networking opportunities. But, in order for those opportunities to be maximised, the higher education sector, the Irish government and Irish society must ensure that incoming students are integrated as well as educated.

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