

## *Implementing ISSE- A Reflection on Institutional Challenges of a new National Survey for Irish Higher Education*

*Aisling Mckenna, Dublin City University*

It's almost 10 years since the introduction of the UK's National Student Survey. Since then, institutional researchers in Ireland have listened with interest to the ongoing debate in the UK (and other jurisdictions) on the aims and the impact of national student surveys, given that Ireland did not, at that time, have a similar survey. However, in March 2013, the first national pilot of the Irish Survey of Student of Engagement (ISSE) was conducted among first and final year undergraduate and all postgraduate taught students in all 7 Irish Universities, 14 Institutes of Technology and 5 Colleges of Education. This article looks at some of the challenges faced by institutional researchers in supporting their institutions in understanding and responding to this new student feedback tool.

### **National Context for the Development of ISSE**

In 2011, the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 recommended that, higher education institutions should put in place systems to capture feedback from students, and use this feedback to inform institutional and programme management, as well as national policy. A national project, funded by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and co-sponsored by the HEA, Institutes of Technology, Ireland (IOTI) and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI), was established in 2012 to deliver a new national student survey towards fulfilment of that goal. Following a period of research and consultation, a survey of student engagement, identical to the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), widely used in Australia and New Zealand, was selected as the preferred instrument for implementation in the Irish higher education sector. The first pilot of the survey was conducted in February 2013 in all Irish Universities and Institutes of Technology, and most Colleges of Education. Following the publication of national results in December 2013, the second ISSE survey was conducted in February and March 2014 in all publicly funded universities, Institutes of Education and Colleges of Education, and a number of other higher education institutions.

## Three Challenges for Institutional Research in Responding to ISSE

### Moving from Data to Information

With over 100 individual questions, ISSE provides a valuable opportunity for institution to undertake a wealth of quantitative analysis. The large number of questions, and the capacity to examine both individual question responses, and engagement and outcome constructs designed for use in the Australasian higher education context, creates challenges for institutional researchers seeking to extract analysis that is both relevant, and digestible to academic staff, administrators and students.



For example, the responses to all 100 individual questions within ISSE are not equally important to all student groups. Therefore institutional research skills can assist in establishing the relative importance of various themes addressed in the survey between different types of students, e.g. depending on their academic discipline or mode of study. Supporting decision makers in identifying the themes which are most relevant to students within their unit of management, and responding to the knowledge gained from this analysis will be crucial in embedding ISSE as a useful feedback mechanism.

Establishing the analysis needs within different units of an institution must also be balanced with the ability of the survey responses to provide statistically meaningful analysis within that unit, e.g. at academic faculty level. In each of the last two years of ISSE my institution, Dublin City University (DCU), had around 1,000 student responses annually. Currently, while the total number of responses allows for strong analysis at a university level within reasonably small margins of error, the total number of responses has not, as yet, allowed for similarly detailed analysis at faculty and individual academic programme level.

### Moving From Reporting to Response

The published national results of ISSE have provided DCU with an opportunity to profile and benchmark its students' engagement through comparable publicly available national and international data, in particular the Australasian (AUSSE) and North American (NSSE) surveys. This type of analysis is obviously very useful for the university, providing insight into the ways in which our students' engagement in university life is either similar or different from their counterparts in other institutions.

Of course, interesting reports are a secondary by-product of the principal purpose of student surveys. ISSE's wealth of data and potential for benchmarking and reporting, while interesting in its own right, is secondary to the instrument's ability to deliver high quality feedback from students to the university and our capacity as an institution to both understand that feedback, and respond appropriately. As ISSE becomes more embedded within the Irish higher education environment, institutional researchers will play an important role in ensuring that the knowledge gained from ISSE is understood, and that feedback can contribute to developing improvements and enhancements.

## Moving from the University's Survey to the Students' Survey

The national branding used for ISSE has focused extensively on themes of valuing the student voice, listening and learning from students, and the aspiration that the survey will shape the future experiences of students.

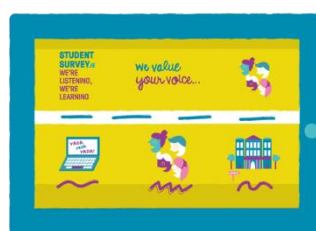
Translating these encouraging messages into actual participation in the survey remains challenging. In 2014, response rates for ISSE nationally were 15.2%.

At DCU, we are examining a number of initiatives aimed at encouraging participation in ISSE, broadly emphasising an increased sense of perceived ownership of ISSE among the student body. This involves a number of approaches, including a review of the university's overall approach to student feedback surveys, and developing

new policies that aim to more effectively balance opportunities for feedback, while avoiding unnecessary survey burden on students. DCU is also continuing to work closely with its Students' Union, to improve communication about surveys to students, and also to increase the level of student-led communication about ISSE to the student body. Finally, DCU are exploring creative methods of communicating ISSE results and the university's response to the feedback received from the survey.

At the 2014 HEIR Conference in Oxford Brookes University in September 2014, I will present on the contributions of institutional researchers in shaping and implementing ISSE alongside my IR colleagues Aoife Flanagan from NUI, Galway and Maura McGinn from UCD. We are looking forward to discussing our engagement in ISSE at both national level and within our own institutions, and learning from the experiences of our international colleagues as they continue to meet the challenges of contributing to understanding of the impact of their own national student surveys.

*Aisling has worked as an Institutional Researcher in Higher Education since 2007, having previously worked as an analyst in the Telecommunications Industry. Her work is focused on providing an evidence informed approach in institutional planning, strategic development and quality enhancement at Dublin City University. Since 2013, she also has responsibility in DCU for supporting DCU's annual rolling planning approach to strategy implementation. Aisling organised the 2010 HEIR conference at Dublin City University. She can be contacted at [aisling.mckenna@dcu.ie](mailto:aisling.mckenna@dcu.ie)*



100 QUESTIONS  
15 minutes  
no wrong answers

**STUDENT  
SURVEY.IE**  
WE'RE  
LISTENING,  
WE'RE  
LEARNING



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