

Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) 2017 – report

Quality Assurance & Statistical Services report for the Vice President Academic Affairs & Research

tabled at Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee, 18 October 2017

Introduction

The Irish Survey of Student Engagement – commonly known as ISSE – is now recognised as a perennial feature on the national third level landscape. More than two dozen Higher Education Institutions take part each year, including the main universities, technological institutes and colleges in the country. Initially established on a pilot basis, ISSE is presently in its fourth full year and there is every reason to believe that it will play an increasingly prominent role in the academic calendar of participants, as well as in conversations regarding the evolution of Irish Higher Education.

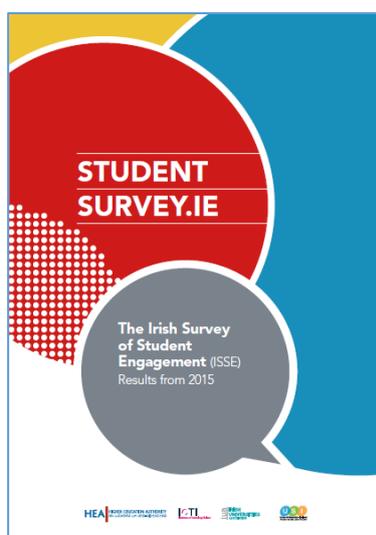
Higher level analyses of the national picture are made available on an annual basis; for the three principal reports published to date, see **figure 1 – ISSE results, data and analysis, 2014-16**. That being said, this analysis centres on an examination of the quantitative and qualitative data pertaining to this institution for 2017, by utilising information released to NCI earlier this summer, as well as putting it into some context. In so doing, it builds on a similar study offered up at the start of last academic year – see *Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE) 2016 – report* for details – an analysis that was considered in a number of different forums (incl. Learning, Teaching & Assessment committee on 10 November 2016), as well as being made available publically on various platforms (e.g. the NCI blog posting entitled *Irish Survey of Student Engagement: national survey, local impact* from 15 February 2017).

This year’s national results are expected to be published later in the autumn, so it makes sense to take stock of what our students told us when ISSE 2017 was opened earlier this spring to receive their feedback. As in previous years, each institution receives its own data before the national report is made available, as well as some information to allow for comparison and to place their results in context. This institution-level report therefore offers initial analysis based on the materials currently available to us, as well as continuing to advocate effective practice such as the ‘virtuous circle’ regarding learner feedback (i.e. promotion, completion, evaluation and action supported by ongoing communication) identified in the *Feedback from students* report disseminated across NCI at the start of 2015-16.

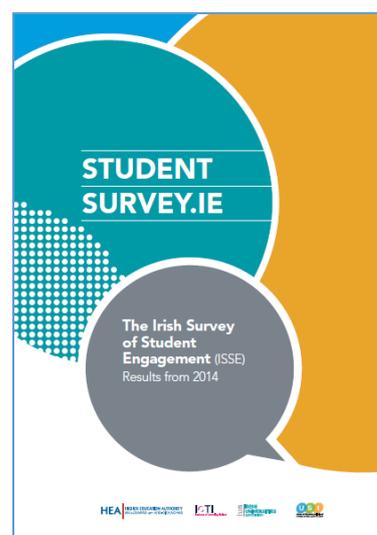
figure 1 – ISSE results, data and analysis, 2014-16



[The Irish Survey of Student Engagement \(ISSE\): Results from 2016](#)



[The Irish Survey of Student Engagement \(ISSE\): Results from 2015](#)



[The Irish Survey of Student Engagement \(ISSE\): Results from 2014](#)

How ISSE links to NStEP

As noted in last year's report, NCI is one of five HEIs participating, initially on a pilot basis, in the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP), but this initiative is expected to grow exponentially in terms of membership and scope as 2017-18 progresses. With the ongoing backing of the HEA, QQI and USI, alongside support from sparqs, the majority of HEIs will soon be taking part; NStEP's membership effectively mirrors the participants in ISSE. In addition, it is worth noting here that the findings and analysis being presented as part of ISSE are informing NStEP, while also allowing for comparisons to be drawn between student engagement in this country and beyond.

NStEP's expansion has direct consequences, including significant opportunities, for this institution. For example, it will see NCI and NCISU co-chairing one of the five new national projects that will run across the next eighteen months, while also allowing us to participate directly in the other four strands. While NCI-NCISU will lead on the first of these projects – it centres on the role and recruitment of class representatives – it is worth noting that the third of these strands will consider student feedback opportunities, data and follow up. In turn, notwithstanding the diversity inherent in Irish HEIs, guidelines suitable for implementation across the sector are anticipated from all five projects. The fact is that the HE landscape is evolving very quickly. Student engagement is suddenly an inherent part of the national conversation, offering possibilities to those who embrace it, while posing serious threats if ignored.

Ultimately, our institution's participation in NStEP will be judged by outcomes, for instance in relation to how we engage with feedback and in turn how we seek to close the feedback loop, as well as in how we advocate and embody the transparency directly associated with student engagement.* This presents us with a real opportunity to contribute to the sector, to learn from others, but most of all to effect positive change at NCI. In the end, this means exemplifying effective practice, as well as demonstrating it through our words and deeds. Having played a significant part in NCI's learner feedback dialogue across the past two years, it is crucial to consider how the aforementioned 'virtuous circle' pertains to reality. In turn, it makes sense to use this report to explore how ISSE 2017 was promoted and completed, before considering how it is being evaluated and acted upon.

Promotion and completion (incl. response rates)

Undergraduate students in their first or final year, as well as postgraduate taught students (PGTs), are invited each spring to provide feedback through ISSE. Various methods have now established themselves in terms of raising the profile of this survey and in promoting it, with one of the main mechanisms, at least from this office's perspective, emerging as the [QA@NCI blog](#). In effect, the means used to promote ISSE 2017 ranged from reporting on the previous year's results to priming those students about to receive invitations to provide feedback, from the physical dissemination of promotional materials to the building up of a social media profile across the campaign, from the direct involvement of student representatives and staff in promoting the survey to using the various means available to provide feedback on how it was progressing. Indeed, even this report must be seen as part of that whole process.

In reporting last year, some emphasis was placed on response rates, which is again the case here, yet there is also some explanation behind the figures presented, as well as a bigger picture. For instance, while the number of our students taking part increased on a number of levels this year when compared to last, NCI continues to lag behind the national average; see **table 1 – comparative participation rates, 2013-17** for details. The national response rate has increased year-on-year ever since this survey was first held, rising from 10.9% in 2013 to 27.2% last year. Yet, while it is worth pointing out that the overall NCI response rate is also now increasing alongside the absolute number of our students taking part, it still remains below the national average. There is room to improve this metric.

Among NCI students, the response rate of first year undergraduate students is the highest (24.1% in 2017 compared to 18.0% in 2016), followed by final year undergraduates (2017 – 23.7%; 2016 – 14.9%) and PGTs (2017 – 22.8%;

* For more background regarding student engagement, including the ten principles underpinning it, see [Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision-Making: Report of the Working Group on Student Engagement in Higher Education](#); for an analysis regarding NCI's contribution to this space, see [Taking Next Steps – a case study: NCI staff and students working together](#), a paper presented on 4 September 2017 to the 39th EAIR Forum held at the University of Porto.

2016 – 23.5%). Increased levels of awareness and enthusiasm among first year NCI students is a positive aspect of ISSE 2017, something which needs to be built upon, but this is only likely to happen if students see tangible evidence that the feedback they have been providing is being acted on. Otherwise, why participate? The response rates of final year undergraduates have increased significantly this year, yet drawing on their altruism can only take this process so far. Why should future finalists contribute to this national process if they do not see evidence that their feedback is impacting locally? This is where closing the feedback loop can really make a difference, by using ongoing communication while also encouraging a culture where people see that rights and responsibilities go hand in hand.

table 1 – comparative participation rates, 2013-17

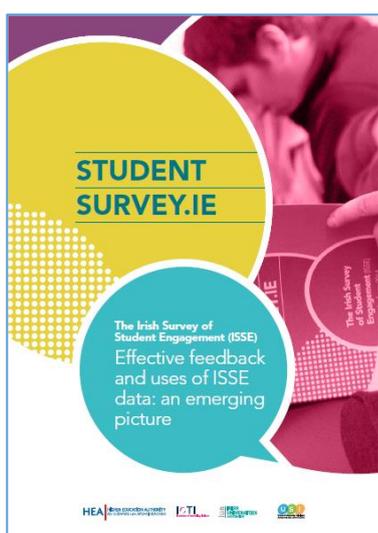
Year	NCI Total Survey Population	NCI Total Respondents	NCI Response Rate	ISSE National Response Rate [†]
2013	–	–	–	10.9%
2014	2,219	461	20.8%	15.6%
2015	2,149	432	20.1%	21.9%
2016	2,483	479	19.3%	22.2%
2017	2,835	663	23.4%	27.2%

[†] NCI was not one of the institutions that took part in the 2013 pilot survey.

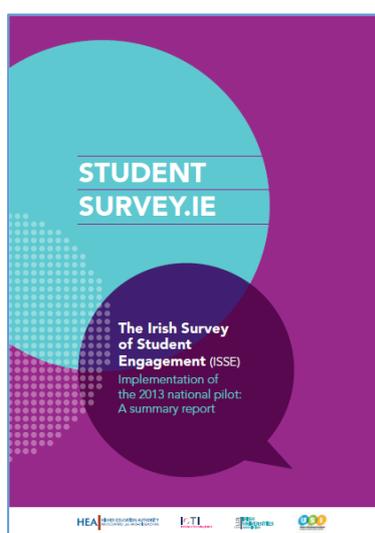
Digging deeper into NCI’s response rate data, it is worth adding that those NCI students who are 24 years or over are significantly more likely to complete the ISSE ahead of those who are younger. Such disparities should ideally act as an invitation to NCI students – with the encouragement of student representatives and staff alike – to take part in greater numbers in future surveys. But, the truth is that our students must also be given good reason to participate, including evidence that the feedback provided previously is, first of all, being heard and, secondly, that it is impacting positively upon the student experience. Making reports such as this one available to all staff and students is one step, but providing concrete proof that all of this effort to elicit feedback actually matters is another journey entirely.

Ideas regarding how this might be achieved are readily available in the supporting literature, but they should not necessarily be limited by what is being advocated there; see **figure 2 – ISSE supplementary reporting and analyses**, in particular with regard to the effective use of feedback data, for further suggestions regarding how programme-level, as well as institutional and national data, might be effectively employed. In sum, we need to be imaginative.

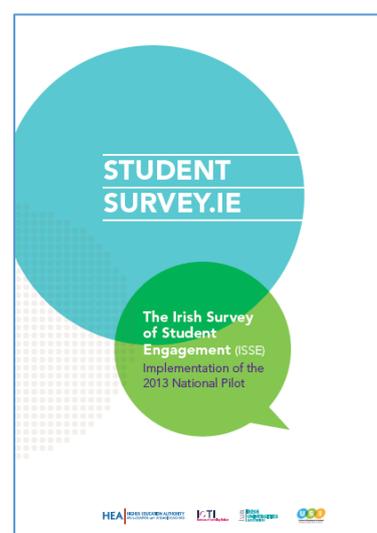
figure 2 – ISSE supplementary reporting and analyses



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



[Irish Survey of Student Engagement \(ISSE\): Implementation of the 2013 national pilot \(A summary report\)](#)



[Irish Survey of Student Engagement \(ISSE\): Implementation of the 2013 national pilot \(Full Reference Report\)](#)

Evaluation and action (incl. initial findings and analysis)

Ahead of the promotion campaign for ISSE 2018, a process that needs to begin now and not just next spring, efforts must be made to increase response rates, not only by targeting those who are not as engaged, but also by building on the feedback from those who are. This paper suggests that it is by considering the evidence presented by ISSE 2017, and responding to it, that the case for greater engagement can be made. As with last year's report, this section offers initial reflections on a number of areas, specifically: (1) levels of student participation inside and outside of the classroom; (2) learner interaction with and support from staff; and (3) feedback to/from staff regarding teaching delivered and assessments undertaken. It uses these same headings in order to consider whether progress has been made, while also using some selective qualitative data in order to see whether it can add to our understanding.

(1) *levels of student participation inside and outside of the classroom*

what does the quantitative data tell us?

In answer to the statement "Asked questions or contributed to discussions in class, tutorials, labs or online", 53% of NCI students respond in the affirmative (i.e. 'Very Often' or 'Often') compared to 51% for all 27 HEIs; last year, the figures were 58% and 53% respectively based upon the 30 HEIs participating. While still above the national average, the level of NCI student engagement is declining in terms of this criterion.

In response to the statement "Come to class without completing readings or assignments", the 2017 figures are 16% for NCI students and 21% nationally, compared to 14% and 21% respectively twelve months previously. Thus, while still below the national average, itself unchanged, more and more NCI students are coming to class unprepared, which clearly poses some problems both for teaching staff and for their fellow students.

In reply to the statement "Asked another student to help you understand course material", the figures elicited this year were 37% for NCI and 42% nationally, whereas they were 36% and 41% respectively in 2016. While the relative increases in this measure of student engagement are relatively small, this is an increasingly worrying feature of HE. It may not be easy to explain exactly why this is the case, but it is possible to suggest that these figures show that, for whatever reason, Irish students are not supporting the learning of their fellow students, and thus are not reinforcing their own understanding of the subject matter at hand.

Finally, in terms of the statement "Worked with other students on projects or assignments", the figures for NCI students and the national average were 59% and 56% respectively in 2017 compared to 63% and 56% last year. This data suggests that, while still ahead of the national average, NCI students are working less and less with their peers on projects or assignments; this should not come as a total surprise, it follows a pattern suggested throughout this set of questions regarding student participation levels inside and outside of the classroom.

what does the qualitative data tell us?

The ISSE 2017 respondents had the opportunity to provide written responses to two open questions; a sample of responses received regarding the levels of student participation inside and outside of the classroom follow:

What does your institution do best to engage students in learning?

- *Constant encouragement, excellent online and static resources, very approachable staff. Beautiful, welcoming environment which understands real world factors which influence student performance and support accordingly.*
- *Lecturers post up to date notes and information on moodle and in class the lecturers make sure every student is involved or inputs in some way.*
- *NCI's Learning and Teaching support centre are absolutely brilliant in helping students.*

What could your institution do to improve students' engagement in learning?

- *Get lecturers to "push" more, specifically outside of class learning*
- *Promote support classes for advancing students who wish to push ahead in certain subjects, to balance the varying levels of experience in groups*
- *More team work coordinated in class and outside of it. More discussions in lectures, there are still a lot of one direction teaching from lecturer to the students.*

(2) learner interaction with and support from staff

what does the quantitative data tell us?

Another interesting finding from the ISSE 2017 data when comparing NCI to all 27 HEIs is in relation to the statement “Discussed your performance with academic staff”. While the affirmative (i.e. ‘Very Often’ or ‘Often’) responses are 14% for NCI and 19% for the sector as a whole (compared to 15% and 19% respectively in 2016 when 30 HEIs took part), it is NCI’s final year undergraduates and PGTs who score relatively highly at 16% and 17% respectively, while our first year undergraduates only score 8%. The fact is that these figures not only compare badly to the national averages for first years (15%), finalists (21%) and PGTs (22%), they also represent a serious and significant fall for NCI undergraduates in the last twelve months, a pattern that has been evident for a number of years. The data suggests that NCI first year students in particular, but in truth all of our students, should be more strongly encouraged to discuss their performance with academic staff, while also taking it upon themselves to take fuller advantage of the learning opportunities afforded to them.

what does the qualitative data tell us?

The ISSE 2017 respondents had the opportunity to provide written responses to two open questions; a sample of the responses received relating to learner interaction with and support from staff follow:

What does your institution do best to engage students in learning?	What could your institution do to improve students’ engagement in learning?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get students to get involved in class discussions and if they are struggling what so ever they are urged to come and look for help • The way they interact with the students, by explaining clearly what they must do and helping all the time on where they go wrong • I think it depends on the group of students that you interact with. Yes there are lecturers there that help to engage in the learning but I think other students also help each other to engage in the learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be more interactive with the students and allow more time for feedback and make it easier to get in contact with staff outside of lecture times • As a part time student it was difficult to get information and contact some lecturers • More engagements between students and academic staff

(3) feedback to/from staff regarding teaching delivered and assessments undertaken

what does the quantitative data tell us?

In terms of student feedback regarding academic staff, the responses in relation to NCI no longer necessarily compare as favourably across the board to the national averages, a significant exception being a more positive response this year from NCI students to the statement regarding the prompt and detailed provision of feedback on completed work; see **table 2 – learner feedback regarding lecturers/teaching staff, 2017**, for more details.

table 2 – learner feedback regarding lecturers/teaching staff, 2017

During the current academic year, to what extent have lecturers/teaching staff ... [‡]	NCI		all ISSE	
	2017	2016	2017	2016
Clearly explained course goals and requirements	68%	72%	69%	69%
Taught in an organised way	64%	67%	69%	68%
Used examples or illustrations to explain difficult points	70%	71%	74%	73%
Provided feedback on a draft or work in progress	40%	41%	46%	45%
Provided prompt and detailed feedback on tests or completed assignments	42%	38%	46%	45%

[‡] The responses contributing to these aggregated figures are ‘Very much’ and ‘Quite a bit’; the 2017 data is based on the 27 HEIs taking part, the 2016 data on 30 HEIs participating.

According to the quantitative – and, as a matter of fact, the qualitative – feedback provided, it is clear that lecturing staff continue to teaching in ways that are valued by NCI students but also anticipated across all HEIs. Thus, while considerable ground has been made up, as noted previously, in terms of the provision of prompt and detailed feedback, NCI now trails by all five of the measures employed this year and last regarding feedback to/from staff in relation to the delivery of teaching and the associated assessment.

what does the qualitative data tell us?

The ISSE 2017 respondents had the opportunity to provide written responses to two open questions; a sample of the responses received regarding feedback to/from staff on teaching and assessments follow:

What does your institution do best to engage students in learning?	What could your institution do to improve students' engagement in learning?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They think through and coordinate the assignments and examination so there is variety in learning and staggers deadlines for assignments. • they make modules interactive and they get you to think and be productive during the modules and always try and get you to apply what you learn to the real world situations • Assigned projects on the learned subject, providing lectures with a lot of examples, explanations, links to additional materials, assigned additional tasks and exercises, lots of numbers of assesments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide more feedback to students during the academic year on assignments and assesments and also on exams. • Perhaps give more feedback on current assignments on where to focus more attention on, since you don't get the exam paper back. • provide more feedback on assignment submissions and projects. i.e. provide commentary on different approaches that could have been used and recommendations. Feedback on what was good would help generate confidence that the particular task was in the zone.

As noted last year, these three lenses – (1) student participation, (2) interaction/support, and (3) feedback – are available to us through an analysis of the ISSE data, with each of them in turn revealing ways in which NCI is meeting or exceeding national averages, while also identifying areas where there is room for improvement. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative data is very powerful, and certainly offers ideas for useful next steps.

Conclusions

In the end, surveys such as this one offer a snapshot regarding what students are thinking and saying, indeed it is possible to identify from the information received where NCI is strong and where there is obvious room for us to improve – see **table 3 – NCI strengths and weaknesses identified by ISSE 2017** for more details.

table 3 – NCI strengths and weaknesses identified by ISSE 2017

Strengths	Weaknesses
NCI response rates are gradually improving, yet they are still below the national average, so more representative data would help.	More of our students tell us they are coming to class unprepared, yet more of them are also prepared to ask questions or contribute.
Students are responding well to increasing levels of feedback on their work, ultimately it helps to identify where they can improve.	Our students are not interacting with staff, or in truth with their peers, to the levels expected of an effective learning community.
Learners appreciate real world examples, effective use of Moodle, and direction from staff both inside and outside the classroom.	Good teaching is appreciated by students, yet poor lecturing technique, disorganisation or a perceived lack of support are contested.

As with last year's report, this analysis should help to inform the ISSE 2018 process, in particular by responding to the feedback received and in closing the feedback loop. However, this process needs to involve all of those operating in this learning community, academic and non-academic staff, as well as students and student representatives. This survey is now consistently offering us feedback regarding what is working and why, as well as areas where we really do need to improve. While the data offered is always open to interpretation, it needs to be embraced, not ignored.