



ESRI Research Bulletin

What predicts international higher education students' satisfaction with their study in Ireland?

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What predicts international higher education students' satisfaction with their study in Ireland?¹

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INTRODUCTION

Across the OECD countries, the internationalisation of higher education has been firmly on the policy agenda. Between 2000 and 2011, the global number of international students more than doubled and in 2011 there were more than 4.5 million tertiary students enrolled outside their country of citizenship (OECD, 2013). In the Irish context, the process of internationalisation has been guided by the Government's Strategy for International Education, *Investing in Global Relationships*, from 2010 to 2015. The number of international students in Ireland increased from just over 5,000 in 2000/2001 to more than 13,000 in 2012/2013, jumping to more than 18,000 in the 2014/2015 academic year.

In the context of increasing numbers of internationally mobile students, relatively little is known about how satisfied international students are with their study abroad and what factors determine their satisfaction. The analysis of this topic is important in the context of the tension between the drive to recruit international students and the practicalities of meeting international students' needs within both the classroom and the wider educational institution. The present study aimed to address this gap.

THE DATA

This study draws on Eurostudent IV data. *Eurostudent* is an international network of researchers, representatives of national ministries, and other stakeholders who have collaborated to examine the social and economic conditions of student life in higher education systems across Europe. The fourth Eurostudent survey examined many of the key characteristics that define an increasingly diverse student population, focussing on areas such as health and wellbeing, income and expenditure, socio-economic background, travel and accommodation. In Ireland, the administration of Eurostudent IV relied on an internet survey, complemented by a postal survey so as to access also part-time students in higher education in Ireland. In total, the findings for Ireland draw upon valid responses of 13,530 students from a population of approximately 180,000 full-time and part-time students, a response rate of approximately 7.5%. Although the profile of respondents was close to the known population profile, survey responses were weighted to reflect the known population parameters of gender and full/part-time status by institution.

Data on students' nationalities were not contained in the Eurostudent IV survey, and in its absence, in this paper 'international student' was defined by proxy using three criteria: respondent was not born in Ireland; respondent's parents were not born in Ireland; and respondent's family home was not in Ireland.

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RESULTS

Exploratory analyses determined which factors played a role in examining students' satisfaction with study. With reference to many life factors explored in the literature, these were grouped together as personal characteristics, institutional characteristics and health and well-being. Further analysis revealed that the strongest influence on students' satisfaction with their studies was their subjective satisfaction with the institution they were attending. In addition, being satisfied with friendships and rating their own health as good were strongly related to how satisfied students were with their studies. Thus, factors of well-being such as good health, a good network of friends, and liking the college environment mattered the most. Age and gender were also important: younger international students (under 23 years of age) were less likely to be satisfied with their studies; while female students were one and a half times more satisfied with their studies compared to their male counterparts. Factors that did not display any significant impact on student satisfaction included type of college attended (university or institute of technology), considering study at least as important as other activities, and broader well-being factors. Interestingly, factors such as satisfaction with accommodation, workload, and finances also had no significant impact on satisfaction with studies.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO ENHANCE STUDENT SATISFACTION WITH THEIR STUDY?

This study examined a broad spectrum of factors impacting on the experiences of international full-time undergraduate students. The results showed that what institution students attend (rather than the type of institution) matters. In addition, broader social context such as having good friends and being in good health shapes how international students feel about their study in Ireland. Indeed, this study was the first to incorporate questions of health (subjectively measured) in the analysis.

In order to ensure high student satisfaction, third level institutions can focus on approaches to enhance their on-campus experience, including their social experience. The findings pointed to the importance of the institutional context for students as well as their social experience - something that is within the scope of education institutions to address. In the context of the Irish government's drive to recruit students from the emerging markets of India, Brazil and China, and a desire to present Ireland as an attractive study destination for nationals of these countries, the findings point towards a need to ensure that the challenges that nationals of these countries may face in adjusting to life in Ireland are addressed through policy and practice, primarily within the education institutions themselves.