

TRANSITIONS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS INTO HIGHER EDUCATION IN IRELAND

Briefing Paper 1 **2017**

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Strengthening Ireland's evidence base for teaching and learning enhancement in higher education



NATIONAL FORUM

FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Transitions of International Students into Higher Education in Ireland

Briefing Paper 1 2017

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Key Insights

- Representatives from Irish higher education institutions (e.g., visiting international officers and lecturers) are seen as the most important source of information about Ireland for prospective students.
- Students coming to Ireland to study would benefit from more insights into Irish cultural and social norms as well as a better grounding in practical issues such as healthcare, arranging utilities, setting up a bank account and gaining part-time employment.
- Most international students felt they were supported by their host institutions in settling into college life and that their induction was useful.
- Many international students came to Ireland with limited knowledge of the academic regulations in their host institutions. Some were challenged by assessments and found many systems to be different to what they had experienced before and to what they had expected.

Introduction

On October 9th 2016, Minister for Education and Skills Richard Bruton T.D. launched the government's new *International Education Strategy for Ireland, 2016-2020* pledging to increase the number of international higher education students and English language students coming to Ireland by over 37,000 by 2020 (Department of Education and Skills, 2016). In anticipation of such ambitious targets being realised, there is an onus on the Irish higher education sector to mobilise considerable knowledge and resources to ensure the needs of its international students are understood in order to inform related supports and policy decisions.

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (National Forum) focused on *Teaching for Transitions* as its enhancement theme for 2013-15. As part of this enhancement theme, a series of research projects were commissioned to build evidence on the transition of students in Ireland into higher education (e.g., National Forum 2015, 2016). In line with the ambitions set out in the new international education strategy and the strong emphasis placed on internationalisation within its parent strategy, the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (Department of Education and Skills, 2011), the current briefing paper aims to supplement our body of knowledge on transitions into Irish higher education by exploring the knowledge and experiences of those who come to Ireland from other countries to study at Irish higher education institutions (HEIs).

Aims of this Briefing Paper

This briefing paper presents a summary of findings from a survey of international students who were studying in Ireland during 2015. Although the primary purpose of the survey was to inform the development of online material for the National Forum funded project *Live and Learn in Ireland: Transitioning International Students into Higher Education in Ireland*¹, the data gathered offers an insight into how international students view their experience of Ireland and, as such, may be of use to those who teach, recruit and support international students, both at an individual and institutional level.

1 The aim of the project, which was a collaboration between the five HEIs of the Southern Cluster (Cork IT, IT Carlow, IT Tralee, Waterford IT and University College Cork), was to create online content that international students could interact with before coming to Ireland to ease their transition into the higher education sector here.

Methodology

Given the geographical disparity of the five participating institutions, it was decided that an online survey of students was the most appropriate method of data collection. The questions in the survey were developed based on the findings of a literature review and the lessons that emerged from a half-day webinar on international student issues. The webinar included presentations from students, international officers and academics working with international students. Following the survey design phase, the questionnaire was piloted through a focus group of twelve international students in IT Tralee. Amendments were made to the survey according to feedback received during the pilot phase. The final draft of the survey consisted of seventeen questions which sought to examine respondents' demographic characteristics, prior knowledge of Ireland, sources of information for such knowledge, and experiences of living and studying in Ireland. The experiences of living and studying in Ireland were examined in three categories: practical, social and academic. The link to the survey was distributed in each of the five participating institutions through the respective international offices. The survey was open from April 2015 until June 2015, by which time 573 responses had been collected.

Profile of Respondents

Across the five participating institutions, the total number of international students at the time of data collection was 3,584, which represented 16% of the total full-time student body in the cluster. The response breakdown across the five HEIs can be found in Table 1.

Table 1 Response rate in participating HEIs

HEI	Number of respondents	% of international students in HEI
Institute of Technology, Carlow	110	37%
Cork Institute of Technology	69	26%
University College Cork	278	12%
Institute of Technology, Tralee	69	23%
Waterford Institute of Technology	43	10%
Unknown	4	

Country of origin

Approximately half of respondents were from EU countries, with the remaining students coming from a wide range of countries (see Figure 1).

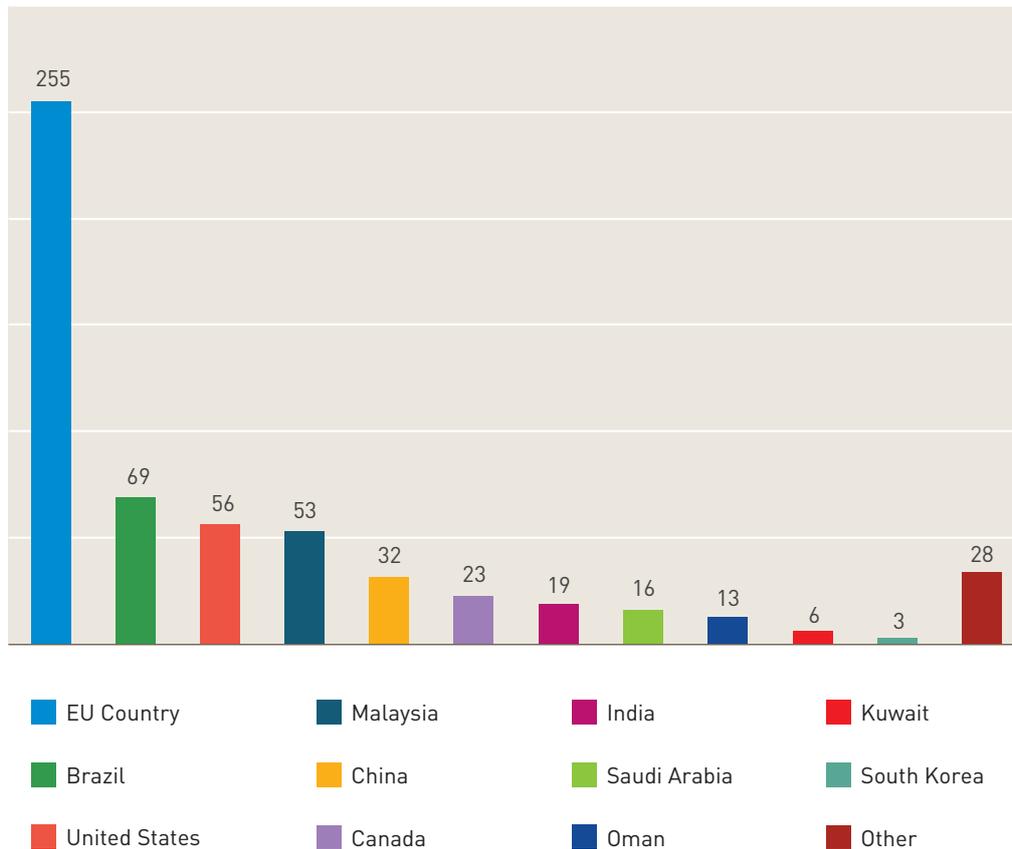


Figure 1 Geographical spread of respondents (n = 573)

The 28 respondents who selected the 'other' category included those from Singapore (6), Nigeria (3), Indonesia (2), Mexico (2), Sri Lanka (2) and Tunisia (2). The following countries were each represented by one respondent: Iran, Iraq, Maldives, Mauritius, New Zealand, Norway, Qatar, South Africa, Taiwan and Trinidad & Tobago.

Field of study

Respondents represented all fields of study, with the highest proportion found to be in Social Science, Business & Law and the lowest in Education, Agriculture & Veterinary and Services (see Figure 2).

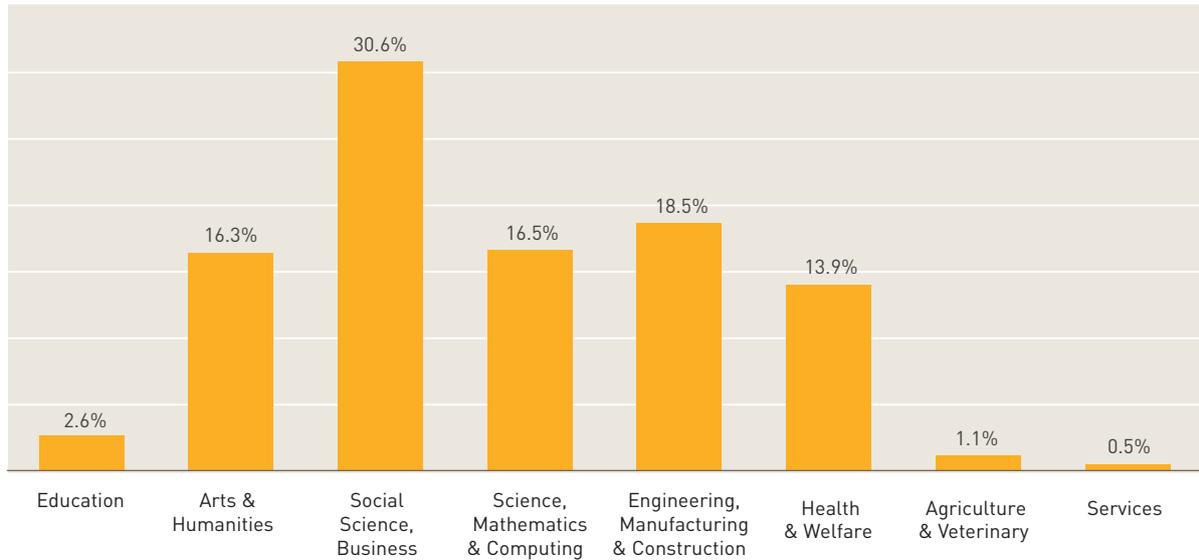


Figure 2 Fields of study represented (n = 569)

Level of English language proficiency

Nearly 21% of 567 respondents categorised themselves as native English speakers. For those who did not, a separate question explored their level of English language proficiency, as recorded in the language test in which they participated prior to coming to Ireland. Of the 285 who responded to this question, over 75% reported having achieved an International English Language Testing System score of 6 or higher with 50% reporting a score of 6.5 or higher².

2 In the recent Science Without Borders Programme that brought Brazilian students to Ireland, host HEIs required a minimum International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score of 5.5 (HEA, 2013).

Findings

The findings section is divided into two sub-sections. The first sub-section details the level of relevant knowledge respondents had prior to arrival and their sources of such knowledge. The second sub-section explores respondents' experiences of Irish higher education and the knowledge they would have found useful.

Knowledge Prior to Arrival in Ireland

Practical knowledge

Respondents were asked to rate their knowledge of nine practical aspects of living in Ireland, ranging from knowledge about immigration procedures to how to set up a bank account (see Figure 3). The knowledge that was most widespread was that which related to the geography of Ireland and accommodation arrangements. Knowledge related to the Irish healthcare system, making arrangements for utilities, working in Ireland and how to set up a bank account was less prevalent. The open-ended responses echoed these findings. Regarding knowledge about working in Ireland, for example, the following comment was typical:

If you want to find work, or make any money from studies, you need to apply for a PPS number ASAP.

(Canadian student)

In total, 392 respondents indicated that they had either some or little or no knowledge regarding immigration policies and procedures. While EU nationals accounted for 155 of these respondents and might not be expected to need such knowledge, a further 237 respondents from outside the EU indicated that they had only limited knowledge about such an important aspect of their move.

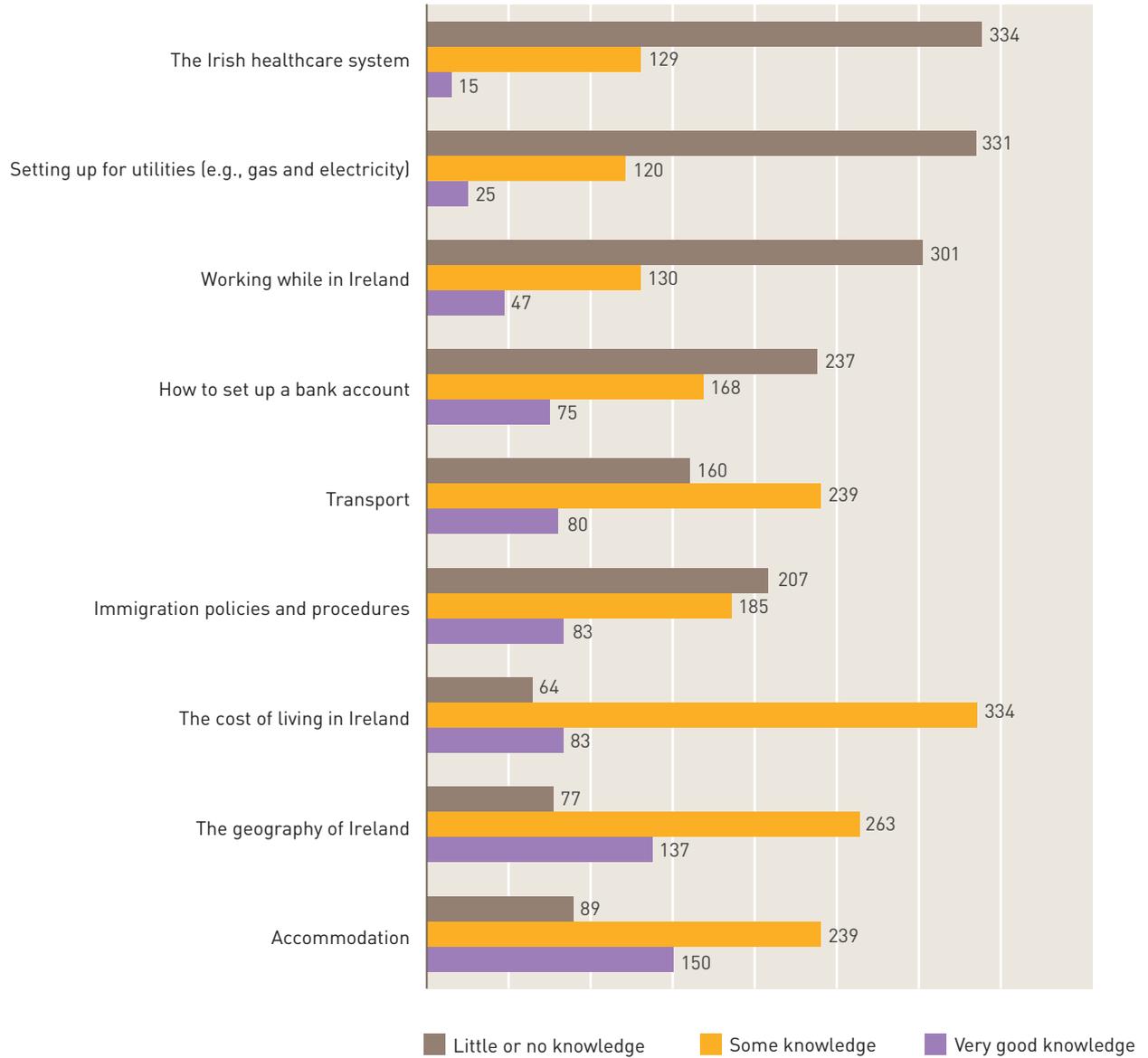


Figure 3 Practical knowledge of respondents prior to arrival in Ireland (n = 482)

Knowledge of Irish social and cultural norms

While practical issues such as setting up a bank account and arranging accommodation are crucial aspects of living and studying in a new country, the importance of also understanding social and cultural norms should not be underestimated. Living anywhere involves forming relationships and communicating effectively. This requires a degree of understanding of the social and cultural nuances of the country. As with the question regarding prior knowledge of practical issues, respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their knowledge of social and cultural aspects of Ireland. Their responses are summarised in Figure 4.

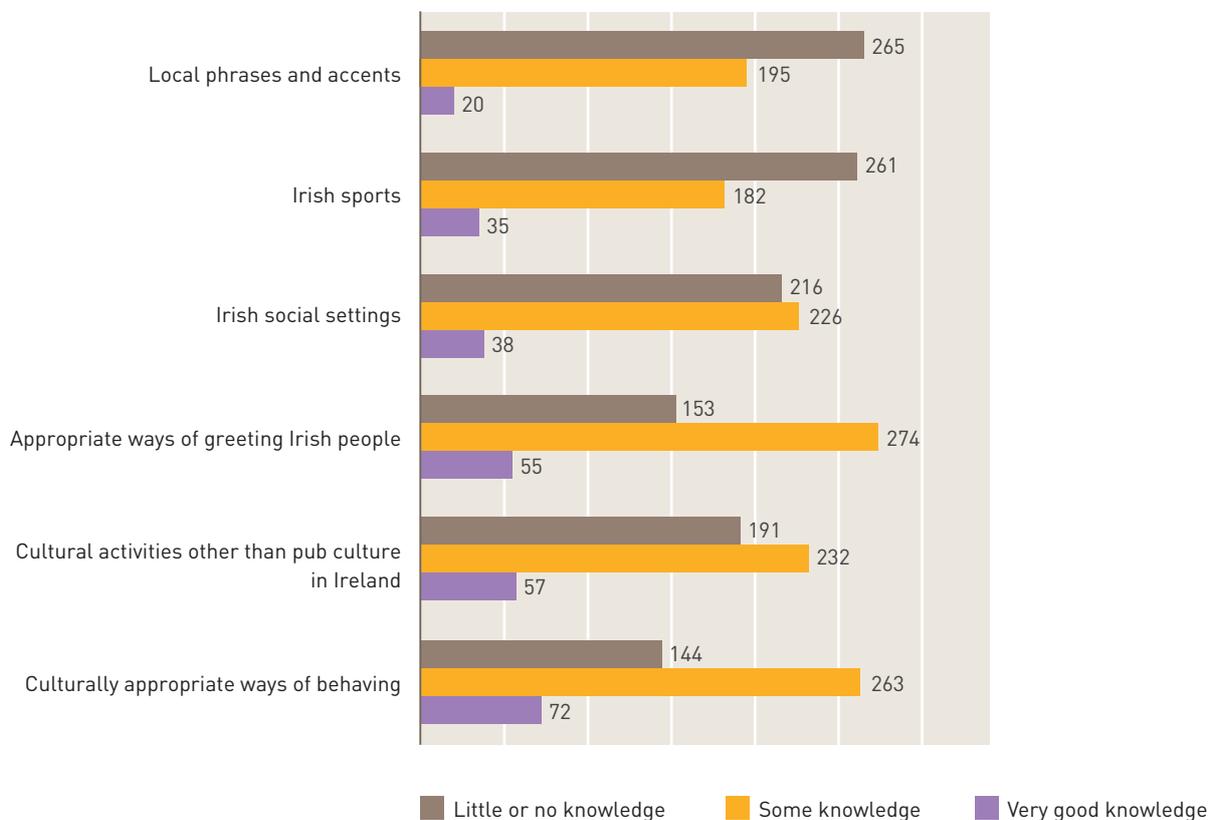


Figure 4 Social/cultural knowledge of respondents prior to arrival in Ireland (n = 483)

Only a small proportion of respondents considered themselves to have a very good level of knowledge with regard to each of the social and cultural aspects explored. Local accents and phrases, Irish sports and Irish social settings were the least well understood. While respondents reported having sufficient language skills in terms of standard English, it can be appreciated that local idioms and accents represent a new layer of knowledge needed to effectively communicate. Further, the following response illustrates the importance of understanding cultural norms and idiosyncrasies:

In Brazil, we talk with people we know. If we don't know that person, someone comes and introduces him/her. Here, the person just comes and starts talking (even if he/she never saw or talked with you). At first, I thought that this was strange and I think I could have met more people if I was aware of this.

(Brazilian student)

Sources of knowledge

Despite the wealth of information available on the internet, it is clear from Figure 5 that visiting international officers are the most important source of information for students, closely followed by visiting lecturers. While sending out people to visit countries in person does of course represent a significant outlay for HEIs, the return on that investment is significant in terms of preparing students for their time in Ireland. Word of mouth from those who had studied or visited Ireland previously was also shown to be a significant source of information. The influence of social media is important, but both parents/family and student recruitment agents are more valued sources of information about Ireland for the prospective student.

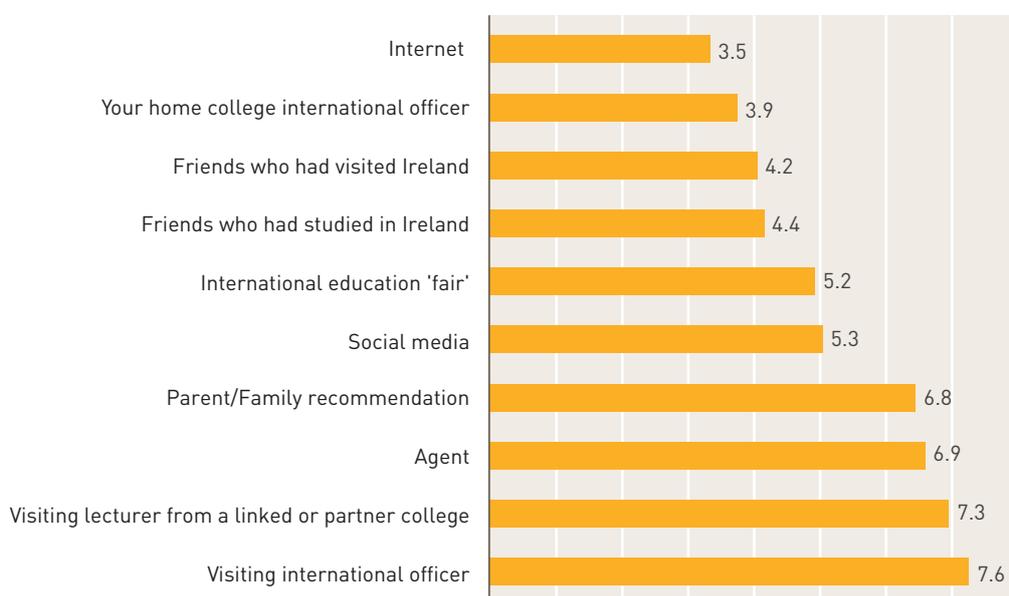


Figure 5 Average rating of sources of information about Ireland (1 = least important; 10 = most important; n = 483)

The lowest scoring source of information in Figure 5 was the internet, which would include websites such as those of the Higher Education Authority, the Department of Education and Skills, Enterprise Ireland, the Irish Universities Association and the Technological Higher Education Authority. These websites often contain valuable information for international students but they were seen by respondents as less valuable sources of information in comparison to, for example, visiting lecturers and international officers.

Experiences of Irish Higher Education

The respondents' experiences of various aspects of Irish higher education can be seen in Figure 6. Most students reported having found the experience of Irish higher education quite different to their experience in their home countries. The most challenging aspects of teaching and learning related to adapting to assessments in Irish HEIs and understanding lecturers. There was a mixed response with regard to respondents' willingness to speak and answer questions in class. This mixed experience of class participation is similar to that found among Irish students transitioning into higher education (National Forum, 2015).

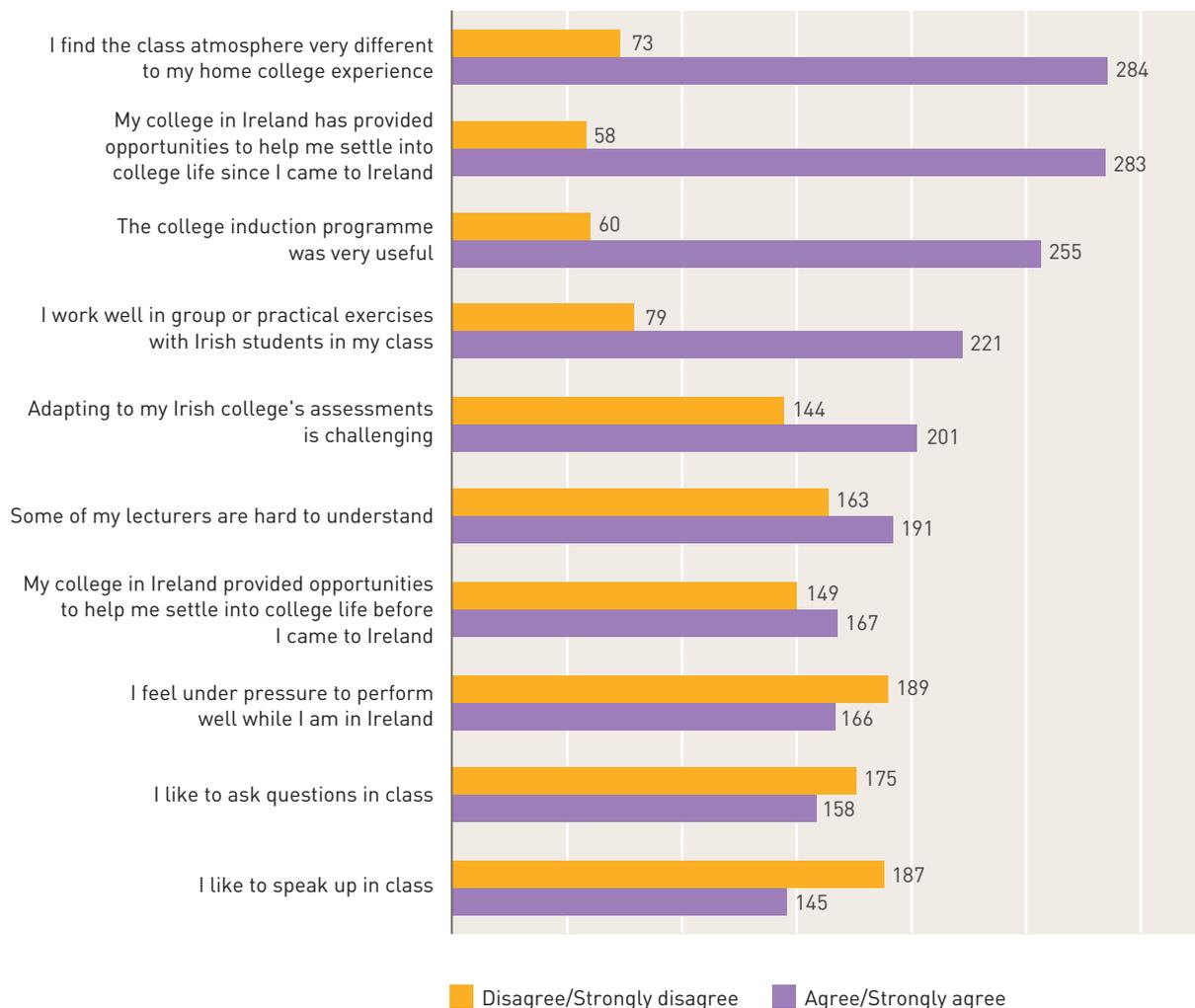


Figure 6 Respondents' experiences of Irish higher education (n = 381)

The HEIs in which students studied did appear to provide opportunities for students to settle into their new teaching and learning environments and most respondents found their induction experience useful.

A strong theme to emerge across the open-ended responses was the importance of the character and nature of the Irish people in creating a welcoming environment. Many respondents commented on the friendliness of the Irish as being one of the highlights of their time in Ireland, as illustrated by these quotes:

Everyone in Ireland is extremely helpful. If you're ever unsure about anything, just ask.

(American student)

Irish people are very similar to Brazilians so I think difficulties are the least. We all can get along very easily.

(Brazilian student)

However, it is important to be mindful that not all experiences are positive and there is a need for vigilance, as the response of this student indicates:

Despite I have good Irish friends that I've known outside college, my classmates never made an effort to help me with the classes. It is normal we think that a subject is difficult because English is not our first language, but most of my classmates never asked whether I was ok or if I needed some help. I think that people in college should be more welcoming with people from different countries and help them more.

(Brazilian student)

Knowledge that respondents would have found useful

When asked in which areas of Irish higher education respondents would have liked to have more knowledge prior to coming to the country, a total of 109 open-ended responses were recorded. The coded breakdown of these responses is detailed in Figure 7.

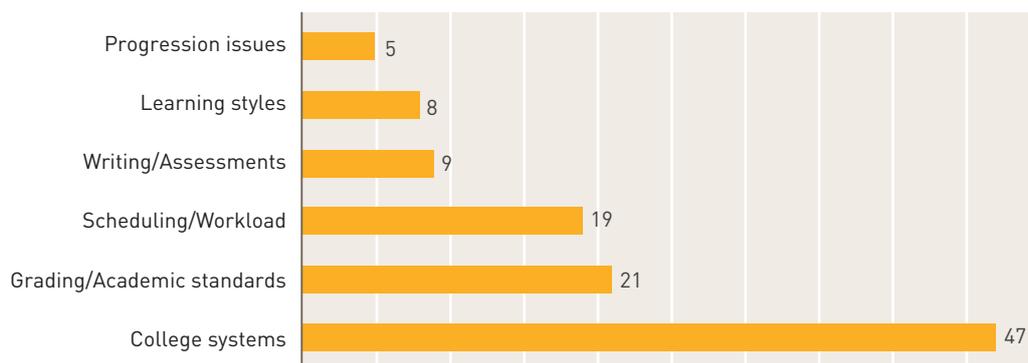


Figure 7 Types of knowledge respondents felt would have been useful to have prior to arrival in Ireland (n = 109)

The most prevalent theme related to college systems, such as procedures for choosing modules, exam procedures and timetabling, appeals mechanisms, exemptions for modules, expectations on class attendance, and timekeeping. The importance for students of being able to navigate the practicalities was emphasised, as this quote shows:

Knowing the class and exam schedules in a timely manner (to be able to plan flights, travel, etc.) and having it readily accessible or distributed.

(Canadian student)

The next most prevalent theme centred on academic standards and grading systems. It was apparent from many of the comments that incoming students had expectations and reference points which differed from the reality, as illustrated by this comment:

Anything above a 70% is awesome, you'll VERY VERY RARELY get above an 80% in an essay.

(American student)

A similar trend was evident with respect to scheduling/workload. Students would have appreciated more prior knowledge of how the institution's calendar was timetabled, both on a daily and semester basis, and the scheduling of exams and assignments. The following open-ended response is representative:

In my home country, the college day is divided between practical and lecture classes. I came here with the same assumption.

(Indian student)

This sense that students' expectations differed from their experienced reality was strongly evident across all five participating HEIs.

Discussion

The findings of this study give us an indication of the kind of knowledge international students found valuable as they experienced life in Irish higher education. It was positive to see that visiting international officers and lecturers are representing Ireland well in providing valued information to international students prior to their arrival. It was also encouraging to see that most respondents felt they were supported by their host institutions and that their induction was useful.

Building upon this good work, it is apparent that students coming to Ireland to study would benefit from more insights into Irish cultural and social norms as well as a better grounding in practical issues such as healthcare, arranging utilities, setting up a bank account and gaining part-time employment. From an academic perspective, the findings suggest that many international students have some similar transition experiences to those of Irish students entering higher education for the first time. They are challenged by assessments and find many systems to be different to what they have experienced before or to what they expected.

These insights offer a valuable opportunity for the Irish higher education sector to target areas of real concern for international students. A better understanding of the social, cultural and practical sides of Irish life will enhance the overall experience of incoming students. Further, by giving students more detail regarding institutional systems they will encounter on coming to Ireland and better managing their expectations of the Irish higher education system, including its workloads and schedules, the sector has an opportunity to ease the transition of international students into Irish higher education and increase the chance of them having a positive experience living and learning in Ireland.

The team involved in the National Forum funded project, *Live and Learn in Ireland*, who carried out the survey reported in this paper, have already produced outputs informed by the survey results which will be highly beneficial to international students coming to Ireland to study. A website has been designed which contains a number interactive multimedia units for students under the headings 'academic', 'practical' and 'social', as well as two units for staff who work with international students.

See <http://www.liveandlearninireland.net> for more detail.

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