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Short bio: Valerie Harvey is Head of Performance Evaluation in the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the state agency with responsibility for the development of the Irish higher education system. For over 10 years, Valerie has managed a range of national statistical data collections for the HEA, with the purpose of enhancing a high-quality evidence base for higher education.

Valerie oversees the operation of Ireland's national survey of students, StudentSurvey.ie, and the national survey of graduates, the Graduate Outcomes Survey. She also develops data sharing projects within the higher education system, with the aim of improving and enriching the evidence base for policy-making. Prior to this role, Valerie has worked in funding, system development and policy roles in the HEA.

Valerie is a graduate of Trinity College Dublin (Mathematics) and University College Dublin (Statistics).

Name: Sean O'Reilly

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Organisation: Technological Universities Association

Country: Ireland

Short bio: The Technological Universities Association (TUA) was established in 2025 as the key national representative and advocacy body for the rapidly evolving technological university sector. It builds upon the legacy of predecessor organisations and reflects the significant changes underway in the sector.

Sean O'Reilly has worked with TUA and previous bodies since 2012. Dealing with academic affairs and data, Sean works with particularly with Registrars / Vice-Presidents of Academic Affairs, but also other key networks, and represents member institutions on numerous national groups and with key agencies. Sean's role focusses on strategic, data-driven decision-making, change management and quality enhancement. He has been centrally involved in multiple sector-wide projects and initiatives.

Prior to returning to Ireland, Sean worked for almost 20 years with schools in the United Kingdom, and spent 7 years leading ICT developments for 130 schools in addition to acting as school inspector.

Name: Lewis Purser

Position: Director (Learning, Teaching & Academic Affairs)

Organisation: Irish Universities Association

Country: Ireland

Short bio: Lewis Purser is Director (Learning, Teaching & Academic Affairs) at IUA, where he works with the Vice-Presidents Academic/Registrars' group. Within IUA he has overall responsibility for a broad portfolio of policy areas, including access, admissions, teaching and learning, student engagement, skills and graduate outcomes, internationalisation, graduate studies and quality. Prior to joining IUA in 2005, Lewis worked at the European University Association and with several United Nations agencies in educational, health and social fields. He is a graduate of Trinity College Dublin and of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies at the University of Geneva.

The Irish Universities Association (IUA) represents, supports and advocates on matters of shared sectoral concern for university members, for whom it is the collective interface with the state. It supports its members in developing sectoral policies and strategies and provides some shared services in researcher mobility, skills, access and internationalisation.

Name: Bryan O'Mahony

Position: President

Organisation: Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn,

Country: Ireland

Short bio: Bryan O'Mahony is the President of AMLÉ. He was Vice President for Academic Affairs and Deputy President for AMLÉ for the two years before this. He was a board member and sat on committees within QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland), NAIN (National Academic Integrity Network). He sits as the ESU (European Student Union) representative and now the HEA Board (Higher Education Authority). Bryan is an advocate for the reform of curriculum and assessment within education, with the well-being and belonging of students in mind.

Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn, the national student union for Ireland and represents more than 400,000 students.

Paper

Title: Re-imagining the Irish Survey of Student Engagement, StudentSurvey.ie

Abstract

StudentSurvey.ie (Irish Survey of Student Engagement) asks students about their understanding and experiences of engagement in higher education, including how their institutions provide opportunities and support for their academic, personal and social development. Undergraduates and taught postgraduates have participated in the online survey annually since 2013.

Over the last decade, StudentSurvey.ie has become an established part of higher education in Ireland with participating institutions making significant efforts to promote participation, analyse and interpret the resulting data, and act appropriately to enhance the quality of students' experiences. The results of StudentSurvey.ie demonstrate the value of student feedback in shaping, safeguarding and promoting shared values. The findings also highlight the need for student participation, including through evidence-building mechanisms such as national surveys, in governance and in both internal and external quality assurance processes (e.g. programmatic review).

Recognising that significant changes had occurred since 2013, a strategic review was undertaken by StudentSurvey.ie between 2022 and 2025. One of the aims of the review was to re-emphasise the central role of the student voice in how to enhance experiences of higher education. Enhancing effectiveness of quality assurance for the future of institutions cannot happen without the inclusion of the multiple perspectives of the most important player in the process – students.

During 2024 and 2025, a new survey instrument was developed that better captures the enablers and obstacles to student engagement. Higher education institution staff (including quality assurance, and teaching and learning offices), students' unions, national policy and quality agencies were key stakeholders in this process. The revised survey aims to respond to the transformative changes that have taken place in recent years in how students engage in learning.

The paper sets out the rationale for review, stakeholder involvement, the development of a revised survey, and opportunities and challenges that have arisen along the way.

What is StudentSurvey.ie?

StudentSurvey.ie is Ireland's national survey of student engagement. The survey has two strands with distinct instruments:

- A survey aimed at first year and final year undergraduate students, and students on taught postgraduate programmes.
- A survey, aimed at master's research and doctoral students.

This paper focuses on the first of these surveys, targeting the views of taught students in Irish higher education institutions.

The StudentSurvey.ie initiative originated in 2012 as a response to Ireland's National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030. The Strategy included recommendations relating to the development and implementation of a national survey of students. The Strategy stated that,

"Students have a major contribution to make in influencing the design of curricula, and in reviewing and providing feedback on them. All higher education institutions should have formal structures to ensure that students are involved in curriculum design and revision"

and recommended that,

"every higher education institution should put in place a comprehensive anonymous student feedback system, coupled with structures to ensure that action is taken promptly in response to student concerns".

The National Strategy continued to state,

"Student representatives should be involved in the process for acting on student feedback, and this process should be transparent and accessible to all students. In addition, a national student survey system should be put in place and the results published."

More recently, a national survey of student engagement has been placed on a legislative footing. The Higher Education Authority Act (HEA)[1] 2022 (Section 45)[2], a significant piece of Irish legislation

[1] The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is the state agency with responsibility for the strategic development of the Irish higher education system.
[2] HEA Act 2022: https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2022/act/31/enacted/en/html

centring on the governance of the higher education system, provides a legislative basis for undertaking surveys of student engagement, involving collecting information:

"for the purpose of documenting student engagement in higher education identifying good practice and any challenges arising,

for the purpose of enhancing student engagement, teaching, learning and assessment at a local level and a national level,

on student opinion on important issues of higher education practice and policy at a local level and a national level…"

Studentsurvey.ie is used by all universities, technological universities, colleges of education and other public higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland. A number of these HEIs also run their own internal surveys from time to time, on particular topics of relevance to that institution.

What are the principles and objectives of StudentSurvey.ie?

The StudentSurvey.ie initiative is underpinned by several key principles[3] which include:

- The explicit aspiration to support and inform enhancement of the experiences of students, as relates to their engagement with their study programmes, student peers, teaching and support staff, and their institutions;
- Meaningful benefits at institutional level to staff and to students;
- Transparency of implementation whilst guaranteeing student confidentiality;
- Minimisation of any additional workload at institutional level and, thereby, to facilitate increased focus on promotion of participation and interpretation of resulting data;
- Effective communication of the overall initiative via the StudentSurvey.ie Team, noting that there are also complementary bilateral interactions between individual institutions and a survey contractor[4];
- Alignment with the higher education System Performance Framework[5].

The overall objectives of StudentSurvey.ie are identified as:

- To increase transparency in relation to the student experience of and engagement with higher education;
- To enable direct student input in expressing their experience and engagement with their higher education institution;
- To ensure that the student voice is heard and acknowledged, with an ongoing partnership to ensure impact from the survey findings, between individual higher education institutions and students' unions;
- To facilitate higher education institutions' efforts to reflect that engagement and those experiences in their policy and practice in an impactful way;

[3] It should be noted that StudentSurvey.ie is a survey of student engagement, not student satisfaction.
[4] A survey contractor is commissioned to implement the survey and return anonymized data.
[5] The System Performance Framework specifies the parameters under which higher education institutions identify their contribution to the achievement of institutional and national strategy, as appropriate to their mission, scale, location, and strategic plan. The SPF is managed by the Higher Education Authority, the funding and regulatory agency under the Minister for Higher Education.

- To help institutions identify areas of strength in how students engage, so they can continue and strengthen these practices;
- To help institutions identify areas requiring further development or improvement in how students engage so they can respond;
- To serve as a guide for continual enhancement of institutions' teaching and learning and student support services;
- To facilitate comparison across the Irish higher education system, and with other higher education systems internationally.

Who participates in StudentSurvey.ie?

All publicly-funded higher education institutions (HEIs) participate in the Survey, along with a small number of private institutions, who pay to participate in the survey.

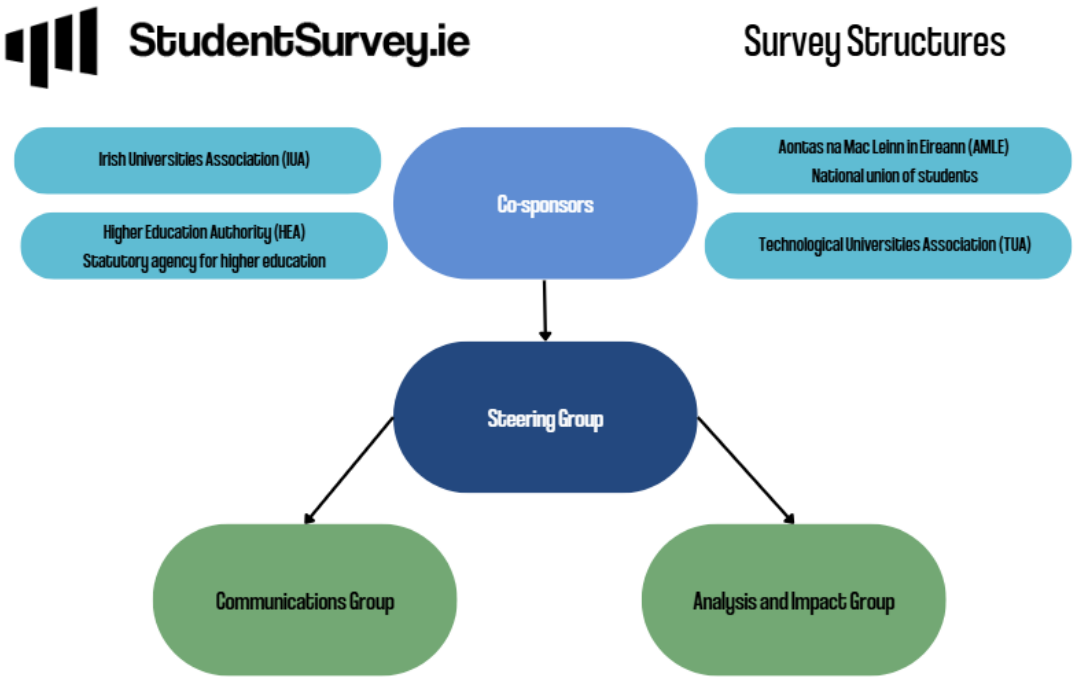
Within each HEI, there is a specific cohort of students invited to participate in the survey. These are first year undergraduates, final year undergraduates and taught postgraduates.

How is StudentSurvey.ie governed?

StudentSurvey.ie is co-sponsored by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Technological University Association (TUA) and AMLÉ (the national union of students) [6].

The national steering group, the StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group, is formed of representatives and nominees of each of the co-sponsors, as well as of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI - the national QA agency), and supported by specific working groups.

[6] Ireland's seven research-intensive universities are represented by the Irish Universities Association (IUA), and newer technological universities and institutes of technology are represented sectorally by the Technological Universities Association (TUA). The technological universities were established between 2019 and 2022, involving the amalgamation of existing institutes of technology across the different regions of Ireland.



The StudentSurvey.ie Steering Group is responsible for strategic oversight of the national student survey initiatives with the following project groups:

- The StudentSurvey.ie Communications Group is responsible for providing guidance, oversight, and approvals for strategic communication planning to promote the survey and encourage student participation.
- The StudentSurvey.ie Analysis and Impact Group to ensure data outputs are fit for purpose and address questions of institutional or national policy concern.

Governance and management structures for StudentSurvey.ie have been designed to ensure wide representation of participating higher education institutions and other partners. Representative bodies periodically refresh steering group and working group membership; not all HEIs are members of the groups at any one time.

A full-time Project Manager and Impact and Analysis Manager are assigned to the StudentSurvey.ie Team within the HEA to ensure coherence and consistency between the various elements of the project.

How was the survey originally developed?

In 2012, when the project began, the US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) was identified as an appropriate initial reference point for an Irish national survey. At the time, NSSE operated in the US and Canada with derivative surveys in use in multiple other countries, including Australia and New Zealand.

Given the potential for coherence with an established instrument deemed relevant to the national context, plus significant validity and reliability testing, a national pilot survey was implemented in 2013 for first year undergraduates, final year undergraduates and postgraduate students on taught programmes. The pilot was followed by national surveys annually thereafter.

What was included in the survey questionnaire (2013-2023)?

The original StudentSurvey.ie questionnaire was extensive and included approximately 60 questions[7]. Groups of similar questions were aggregated to form "indicator scores" which aimed to capture student engagement under various headings. Indicator scores were not percentages but rather represented relative performance; and were calculated scores to enable interpretation of the data at a higher level than individual questions, i.e. to act as signposts to help the reader to navigate the larger data set.

The indicator score headings included:

- Higher order thinking
- Reflective and integrative learning
- Quantitative reasoning
- Learning strategies
- Collaborative learning
- Student faculty interaction
- Effective teaching practices
- Quality of interactions
- Supportive environment
- Learning, creative and social skills

Responses to questions were converted to a 60-point scale, with the lowest response placed at 0 and the highest response placed at 60.

When and why was StudentSurvey.ie reviewed?

In 2022, the survey entered a period of Strategic Reflection and Review. The review process aimed to deepen understanding of student engagement within the context of a rapidly evolving higher education landscape.

Further, the survey was beginning to experience an increasing level of disengagement from students. Student criticisms[8] of StudentSurvey.ie included concerns that the survey lacked context, reducing diverse courses at different institutions to simple metrics; and in turn this could imply that these metrics can be used to compare and rank courses and institutions. Students' unions also argued that such surveys could be used to justify tuition fee increases and treat students as consumers rather than community members.

[7] This was a minor revision to the survey in 2015/16, reflecting revisions carried out by NSSE.
[8] https://students4change.eu/2022/10/16/whats-wrong-with-studentsurvey-ie/, https://trinitynews.ie/2023/11/tcdsu-council-passes-motion-to-boycott-studentsurvey-ie/, https://congress.usi.ie/new-proposed-motions-comhdhail-2024/

As a first step, the Review commissioned two external reviews[9] to provide actionable insights and inform the redesign of StudentSurvey.ie.

- The Mi:Lab report examined the day-to-day operations of the survey within institutions, identifying key challenges faced during implementation.
- The Crowe report engaged senior management and recognized StudentSurvey.ie as a well-established tool for capturing the student experience in teaching and learning within the Irish higher education sector. However, it also highlighted challenges related to the survey instrument, governance, strategic objectives, and the impact of survey outcomes.

Informed by these reports and extensive feedback from stakeholders, the Steering Group decided to pause fieldwork in 2024, opting instead to conduct a comprehensive review of the survey instrument. This review sought to reaffirm the pivotal role of the student voice in enhancing higher education experiences.

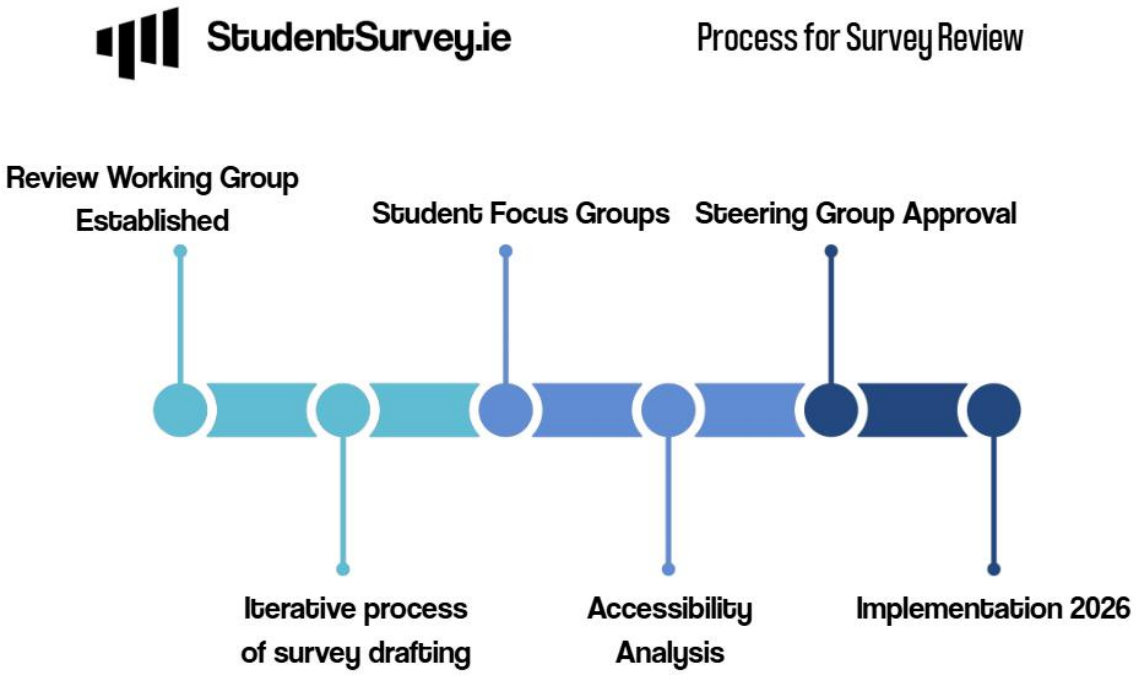
How was the review carried out?

A Review Working Group, consisting of representatives from HEIs, students' unions, QQI and the HEA, was established to guide the redesign of the survey instrument, and began its work in late 2023. The terms of reference of the Group included responding to the identified areas of concerns regarding the survey instrument such as its perceived length, complexity and relevance to the contemporary student body, and ensuring the survey data analysis and dissemination responds to the needs of the cross-section of higher education stakeholders, including the HEA (as the state agency for higher education), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (the quality assurance agency) and AMLÉ (the Union of Students in Ireland).

Throughout 2024 and 2025, the questionnaire underwent multiple revisions through a collaborative process. This involved meetings of the Review Working Group, where feedback was actively gathered, documented, and used to update and distribute revised drafts for further review. A draft questionnaire was evaluated via student focus groups over a six-week period in February and March 2026. Subsequently, experts in plain language and survey accessibility were engaged to give a final assessment of the questionnaire (see below).

The survey instrument was signed off by the Steering Group in late June 2025, allowing time for arrangements to be made for its implementation in HEIs in February and March 2026.

[9] Both reports are available at https://studentsurvey.ie/list-studentsurveyie-resources.



How did the review process adequately capture the concerns and inputs of all stakeholders?

Not only did the Review Working Group consist of representatives of all the co-sponsoring agencies, but sectoral progress updates were also provided more broadly to the higher education system, including HEI registrars.

As noted above, focus groups were conducted to gather feedback on the revised survey instrument from a diverse cross-section of higher education students. Focus group interviews, conducted across a broadly representative range of higher education campuses, were identified as the most effective method to collect data from the sample. A focus group protocol was developed and implemented to guide the focus group interviews. Subsequent drafts of the survey questionnaire took account of the feedback received from students.

Overall, the Focus Group discussions produced substantial engagement with participants, and the process produced valuable feedback that contributed to the improvement of the survey instrument from the participant perspective.

How was accessibility ensured?

It is crucial that the language of StudentSurvey.ie is understood by participants. A criticism of the original version of the survey was that language was obfuscatory, and some students would have had difficulty with understanding the lengthier or more complex questions.

Further, the National Adult Literacy Agency was invited to assess a final draft of the survey and offered helpful feedback for the accessibility of the language of the questions, while Red C Marketing Agency provided desktop feedback on the survey overall and provided a number of suggestions that have been incorporated into the final draft.

Accessibility considerations (e.g. colours, contrasts and typefaces) are currently being incorporated into the design and user experience of the online survey tool.

How does the revised survey differ from the original survey?

The revised survey was underpinned by a revised definition of student engagement:

Student engagement incorporates behavioural, cognitive, affective and social engagement on the part of the student, in partnership with their institutional ecosystem, to support learning, academic performance and belonging.

There are significant differences between the original and revised surveys.

In terms of the questionnaire, the revised survey has been significantly shortened, when compared with the original survey, from over 60 questions to just over 30. This should help to mitigate threats of the response rate decreasing.

The student has been re-centred within the instrument, and more accessible language is used (note the contracting of the National Adulty Literacy Agency above).

Questions that explore specific and current topics of interest of multiple stakeholders - student representatives, institutions, and national policy actors have been added. These include:

- Student accommodation
- Finances
- Commuting
- Other student responsibilities, such as employment and caring
- Online education
- Feedback
- Belonging

There has not been any removal of any particular overarching theme or topic of question (e.g. student staff interaction, or higher order thinking), but the revised questionnaire has seen a non-continuation of a substantial number of questions from the outgoing survey, and ess priority on the inclusion of questions that statistically contributed to calculated indicator scores due to the reduced number of questions and, resulting, less demanding analysis of data. This means there is less repetition of similar questions but also less of a “deep dive” into the themes of the original survey.

What opportunities does the new survey provide?

The revised survey provides an opportunity for a fresh impetus for student engagement with a national survey, and the survey review structures have given primacy to student concerns and interests. Given that the survey is shorter and more accessible, there is also an opportunity for the survey to gather more robust response rates from students.

In tandem with the development of the new survey instrument, the transfer of the survey’s operation to the HEA should allow for the survey to more readily contribute to national policy discussions and frameworks.

The steering group has also decided that the survey will now run every second year, allowing more time in between for HEIs to analyse the survey data and share these with relevant internal and external stakeholders, with a renewed focus on enhancing student engagement.

What challenges arise with the new survey?

There is a need to ensure strong buy-in to the new survey from all stakeholders. This particularly includes students' unions. Engagement and support for the revised survey may present challenges after a lack of fieldwork between 2024 and 2025, so it is vital that communications for the new survey are regular, clear and provide all parties with a strong sense of a well-run survey administration which will collect robust data.

As always is the case with a new data collection, there is a loss of historical and trend data. There are those stakeholders who were keen not to lose indicator scores, and efforts will need to focus on ensuring that data from the new survey is seen as valuable and useful.

Have the strategic priorities of StudentSurvey.ie for the coming 10 years changed?

When StudentSurvey.ie was first introduced, there was no single national survey of student engagement. The embedding of StudentSurvey.ie within the Irish higher education landscape puts the revised survey in a different context to its predecessor.

Overall, the objectives of StudentSurvey.ie have not changed significantly, and are focussed on providing transparency in relation to the student experience, enabling direct student input, ensuring impact from the survey findings collaboratively between HEIs and students' unions; and facilitating HEIs' efforts to reflect and enhance students' experiences in their policy and practice.

The project also wished to learn from experience of other aspects of the project. One of these relates to the frequency of the survey. A criticism of the annual cycle of data collection is that there is little time to focus on the impact of the survey's results, as energy and effort is continually focussed on the data collection part of the cycle.

A possible future objective for the survey would be to understand how student engagement differs for particular cohorts of students not yet captured in survey data, such as disadvantaged or disabled students. There is an opportunity with the siting of survey management within the HEA to link in with other national data sources. However, this must be seen in the context of the need to maintain anonymity of student responses within their HEI.

What are the next steps for StudentSurvey.ie?

The new StudentSurvey.ie questionnaire will be implemented in 2026 across Irish higher education institutions, and the project Team is putting in place promotional activities and incentives to encourage student participation; and strong response rates will be a key indicator of the enthusiasm for the new survey and commitment to its content. The survey's contractor is developing reporting templates to meet HEIs' data requirements, in collaboration with HEIs.

Next, the Steering Group will consider whether the cohort of students to be included in the survey should potentially be widened (currently the survey only addresses first year and final year ndergraduates, and taught postgraduates).

Taking account of the new topics included in the survey (such as student finances and accommodation), there is an opportunity for greater linking of survey data to national policy frameworks and discussions.

Conclusion

Over the last decade, StudentSurvey.ie has become an established part of higher education in Ireland with participating institutions making significant efforts to promote participation, analyse and interpret the resulting data, and act appropriately to enhance the quality of students' experiences.

The results of StudentSurvey.ie demonstrate the value of student feedback in shaping, safeguarding and promoting shared values. The findings also highlight the need for ongoing student participation, not just in the initial years of the project, including through evidence-building mechanisms such as national surveys, in governance and in both internal and external quality assurance processes (e.g. programmatic review).

However, continued engagement with the survey and its data cannot be taken for granted. The survey's review has highlighted the need to keep the survey relevant for all stakeholders, particularly given the rapid changes occurring in both higher education and society generally.