



## 13th European Quality Assurance Forum

### Broadening the scope of QA

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#### Call for contributions: paper submission form

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*Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.*

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#### Author(s)

**Name:** Sean O'Reilly - for correspondence and presentation  
**Position:** Project Manager, Irish Survey of Student Engagement  
**Organisation:** Technological Higher Education Association  
**Country:** Ireland  
**E-mail address:** [Sean.OReilly@thea.ie](mailto:Sean.OReilly@thea.ie)

#### Short bio (150 words max):

Sean O'Reilly is project manager for the Irish Survey of Student Engagement. He coordinates activities of project working groups, ensuring coherence and consistency as the project progresses. He manages engagement with institutions, project sponsors and other stakeholders. Sean's career in education included 6 years as external school adviser and inspector in the UK. In this role, he supported school leadership teams dealing with operational and management issues including self-evaluation and external inspection. On his return to Ireland, Sean worked on communication and implementation of the Irish National Qualifications Framework and the European Qualifications Framework. He has worked as an independent consultant on a variety of projects, primarily related to qualifications frameworks. Sean has been involved with the Irish Survey of Student Engagement since 2012.

#### Author(s)

**Name:** Dr. Jennifer Brennan  
**Position:** Director of Research, Development and Innovation  
**Organisation:** Technological Higher Education Association  
**Country:** Ireland  
**E-mail address:** [Jennifer.Brennan@thea.ie](mailto:Jennifer.Brennan@thea.ie)

#### Short bio (150 words max):



Dr. Jennifer Brennan is Director of Research, Development and Innovation at the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA). Her role involves advocacy, promotion and support for the technological higher education sector to enable them to broaden and deepen their activities in research, innovation and engagement. Prior to joining THEA, Jennifer was Ireland's National Contact Point for the European the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) funding programme. She continues to represent Ireland's interests in the MSCA programme in the role of National Delegate to the MSCA Programme Committee. Jennifer has a background in research and has worked in academia in the UK, USA and Ireland. She is particularly interested in researcher career development, gender in research, and responsible research & innovation. She is currently the Deputy Chair of the National Forum on Research Integrity and Chair of the finance sub-committee of the Athena SWAN National Committee.

#### Author(s)

**Name:** Professor Lucy Byrnes  
**Position:** Dean of Graduate Studies  
**Organisation:** National University of Ireland, Galway  
**Country:** Ireland  
**E-mail address:** [lucy.byrnes@nuigalway.ie](mailto:lucy.byrnes@nuigalway.ie)

#### Short bio (150 words max):

Professor Lucy Byrnes is the Dean of Graduate Studies at the National University of Ireland, Galway. Professor Byrnes chaired the Irish University Association, Deans of Graduate Studies Group in 2013 during a key period in the development of the National Framework for Doctoral Education. In that role, she was on the advisory committee driving the Irish universities doctoral education agenda in the Framework's design and development. Professor Byrnes is a biochemist, in the School of Natural Sciences specialising the molecular and cellular basis of cardiovascular disease in zebrafish. Prof Byrnes has supervised 11 PhD students to completion.

#### Author(s)

**Name:** Dr. Emer Cunningham  
**Position:** Graduate Education Development Manager  
**Organisation:** University College Dublin  
**Country:** Ireland  
**E-mail address:** [emer.cunningham@ucd.ie](mailto:emer.cunningham@ucd.ie)

#### Short bio (150 words max):

Dr. Emer Cunningham is a Graduate Education Development Manager in the Graduate Studies office of University College Dublin (UCD). UCD introduced a programme of reforms of doctoral education governance and practices in 2006 including the introduction of the UCD Structured PhD. Emer has been involved in the implementation of the elements of the Structured PhD and supporting the development of thematic, interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaborative programmes. Furthermore, she has been engaged in the development of policies and procedures which support the university's research degree academic regulations. Emer is a graduate of University College Dublin (BSc and MSc in Pharmacology) and has a PhD in cell biochemistry from University College London. Emer has 10 years' experience working as a researcher in the biotechnology industry in Ireland and the



United Kingdom. Prior to her position in UCD, she worked for the Higher Education Authority (HEA) of Ireland.



#### Author(s)

**Name:** Dr. Mary Deasy  
**Position:** Head of Research and Manager, Centre for Applied Science for Health  
**Organisation:** Institute of Technology Tallaght  
**Country:** Ireland  
**E-mail address:** [Mary.Deasy@it-tallaght.ie](mailto:Mary.Deasy@it-tallaght.ie)

#### Short bio (150 words max):

Dr. Mary Deasy has been a lecturer in the applied science department at the Institute of Technology, Tallaght (ITT), for almost 25 years, and previously worked in the pharmaceutical industry as a research and development chemist. She is one of the founding members of the National Centre for Sensor Research, the Microsensors Centre for Clinical Analysis, and the Centre for Applied Science for Health with an active research group in organic synthesis, focusing on antimicrobial drug design, sensor technology, and biomaterials from macrocyclic compounds. She developed the Institute's research policies, procedures and regulations, and managed the Institute's application for delegation of authority to make awards at research NFAQ Levels 9 and 10, along with the follow-on Institutional Review. She is currently managing postgraduate research studies and manages the Centre of Applied Science for Health, and the industry-focused taught masters degree programmes in the pharmaceutical and food technology areas.

#### Author(s)

**Name:** Michael Frain  
**Position:** Research Degree Programme Manager: Graduate & Professional Studies  
**Organisation:** University of Limerick  
**Country:** Ireland  
**E-mail address:** [Michael.Frain@ul.ie](mailto:Michael.Frain@ul.ie)

#### Short bio (150 words max):

Michael has varied experience in both academic and research administration within the Third Level Education Sector. He has been directly involved development of policies and procedures which underpin the university's research degree programmes and the academic regulations. Michael is a member of the Irish Universities Association (IUA) Deans of Graduate Studies Committee. He is a graduate of both the University of Limerick (BA) and University College Dublin (Master by Research-Sports Studies) respectively.

#### Author(s)

**Name:** Professor Suzanne Guerin  
**Position:** Associate Professor in Research Design and Analysis  
**Organisation:** University College Dublin  
**Country:** Ireland  
**E-mail address:** [suzanne.guerin@ucd.ie](mailto:suzanne.guerin@ucd.ie)

#### Short bio (150 words max):



Suzanne is an Associate Professor in Research design and Analysis with the School of Psychology at University College Dublin. Having completed her PhD in the School she joined the staff team as a lecturer in 2000. A significant proportion of her teaching is in the area of applied psychology and research methods and she is involved in the delivery of modules at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. I supervise postgraduate research students on the MLitt and PhD programmes. She is Deputy Director of the UCD Centre for Disability Studies and jointly coordinates the MSc in Rehabilitation and Disability Studies. Professor Guerin was appointed by the National Federation of Voluntary Bodies, as their National Designated Expert in Research Methods in Intellectual Disability Research and have previously served as Interim Head of Research at the All Ireland Institute of Hospice and Palliative Care.

#### Author(s)

**Name:** Rachel Keegan  
**Position:** Graduate Studies Manager  
**Organisation:** Dublin City University  
**Country:** Ireland  
**E-mail address:** [rachel.keegan@dcu.ie](mailto:rachel.keegan@dcu.ie)

#### Short bio (150 words max):

Rachel Keegan has worked in the area of postgraduate research administration in Dublin City University (DCU) for over 12 years and is the Manager of DCU's Graduate Studies Office. Rachel works closely with the Dean of Graduate Studies in developing the unit's strategy, managing external and collaborative engagement, drafting and updating policy, regulations and process in consultation with university stakeholders and monitoring national and international policy and research developments pertaining to doctoral education.

#### Author(s)

**Name:** Professor Mary McNamara  
**Position:** Head of Graduate Research School  
**Organisation:** Dublin Institute of Technology  
**Country:** Ireland  
**E-mail address:** [mary.mcnamara@dit.ie](mailto:mary.mcnamara@dit.ie)

#### Short bio (150 words max):

Professor Mary McNamara graduated with a PhD in Physical Inorganic Chemistry from University College Dublin, is a fellow of the Royal Society of Chemistry and a former member (2012-2018) of the steering committee of the Council of Doctoral Education of the European Universities Association. She is an active researcher in novel drug delivery systems. As Head of the Graduate Research School at DIT, Professor McNamara manages the educational programmes and events to enhance the graduate research student experience and is the guarantor of graduate research quality assurance. In Ireland, Professor McNamara is a member of the National Forum on Research Integrity which guarantees the continual development and adoption of good practice and provides a strengthened approach to ensuring research integrity in Ireland. She is also a member of the National Advisory Forum for Ireland's National Framework for Doctoral Education.



#### Author(s)

**Name:** Nicki O'Connor  
**Position:** Senior Policy Advisor  
**Organisation:** Higher Education Authority  
**Country:** Ireland  
**E-mail address:** [noconnor@hea.ie](mailto:noconnor@hea.ie)

#### Short bio (150 words max):

Nicki O'Connor is a senior policy advisor with the Higher Education Authority (HEA). She joined the HEA four years ago from Enterprise Ireland where she managed its campus incubation programme and also undertook a number of policy roles. Prior to this, Nicki worked in Forfas, the Institute of International and European Affairs and the private sector. She holds a BA in Economics from Trinity College Dublin and an MA in International Relations from DCU.

#### Author(s)

**Name:** Lewis Purser  
**Position:** Director of Learning and Teaching and Academic Affairs  
**Organisation:** Irish Universities Association  
**Country:** Ireland  
**E-mail address:** [Lewis.Purser@iua.ie](mailto:Lewis.Purser@iua.ie)

#### Short bio (150 words max):

Lewis Purser is Director (Learning & Teaching and Academic Affairs) at IUA, where he works with the Vice-Presidents Academic/Registrars' group, and also supports other groups including the admissions officers, access managers/directors, international officers, quality officers, heads of teaching and learning and heads of student services. From 1998-2005 he was programme manager at the European University Association. A graduate of Trinity College Dublin and of the Graduate Institute of Development Studies at the University of Geneva, he worked from 1989-1998 with various higher education institutions in Hungary, Romania and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and with several United Nations agencies in educational, health and social fields.

#### Author(s)

**Name:** Professor Joseph Stokes  
**Position:** Dean of Graduate Studies  
**Organisation:** Dublin City University  
**Country:** Ireland  
**E-mail address:** [joseph.t.stokes@dcu.ie](mailto:joseph.t.stokes@dcu.ie)

#### Short bio (150 words max):

Professor Joe Stokes is currently the Dublin City University Dean of Graduate Studies. Prior to this appointment he was Head of School of Mechanical and Manufacturing Engineering. Professor Stokes was awarded the degrees of B.A. and B.A.I. in Mechanical and Manufacturing Engineering from Trinity College Dublin in 1997 and his PhD in Surface Engineering from DCU in 2002. His professional achievement includes the production of coated and free-standing engineering components using the



HVOF (High Velocity Oxy-Fuel) process, other processes include Atmospheric Plasma and Flame Thermal Spray (Thermal Spray facilities), including Tribological Assessment. Applications of his research include: Wear Reduction, Bio-coatings for Implant Replacement Therapy, Oil and Gas Protective Coatings to mention a few. He is an active member of the Centre for Medical Engineering Research (MEDEng) and the National Centre for Plasma Science and Technology (NCPST).

## **Proposal**

**Title: Implementation of the first national survey to measure the experiences of postgraduate research students**

### **Abstract (150 words max):**

A collaborative partnership of higher education institutions, students' representatives and national agencies has developed and implemented a national survey for postgraduate research students. Data from the Irish Survey of Student Engagement for Postgraduate Research Students (ISSE-PGR) complements the significant data set generated by a survey offered to students pursuing taught programmes which has been in operation since 2013. Data from the established survey is increasingly used by institutions and national agencies in structured discussions of quality assurance and quality enhancement.

The partnership undertook research on a range of surveys offered to postgraduate research students nationally and internationally before developing an instrument that reflected the national policy context and facilitated some international comparison. Fieldwork took place in February-March 2018. This paper describes the approach taken to develop this additional evidence source for quality assurance / enhancement and poses a number of questions for further consideration.

**Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details. No**

### **Text of paper (3000 words max):**

#### **1. National context**

The state-funded higher education system in Ireland consists of seven universities, fourteen institutes of technology and a small number of specialised institutions. The number of students participating in higher education has increased significantly over recent decades with over 225,000 full-time, part-time and remote students enrolled in state-funded institutions in 2016/2017. The number of full time new entrants to undergraduate higher education was 5% higher in 2016/2017 than five years ago and this trend is predicted to continue. There are more than 9,800 postgraduate research students in state-funded institutions which represents an increase of 6% since 2013/2014.

The Department of Education and Skills (the ministry) published *The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* in January 2011, following extensive consultation. The document makes a number of key recommendations, including a number of structural reforms. One of the recommendations is the development and implementation of a national survey of students. The strategy states 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.”*

A review of quality assurance mechanisms, undertaken in Irish universities by the EUA in 2005 noted a lack of systematic mechanisms to ensure that departments had regular and clear information from students regarding the quality of teaching and of the learning environment.

*The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 notes that “while substantial progress has been achieved in the intervening years, students still lack confidence in the effectiveness of current mechanisms and there remains considerable room for improvement in developing student feedback mechanisms and in closing feedback loops” and recommends 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 continues 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.”*

A collaborative partnership representing students, institutions and state agencies was established in 2012 to act upon this recommendation. The (national) Irish Survey of Student Engagement (known as “ISSE”) began with a national pilot in 2013 and has taken place annually since that time. Early in the process of researching international practice, the partnership determined that the focus of the survey should be on student engagement with learning rather than simply satisfaction. Student engagement with college life is important in enabling them to develop key capabilities such as critical thinking, problem-solving, writing skills, team work and communication skills (Kuh, G.D. (2001); Pascarella E., Terenzini P. (2005)).

First year undergraduate students, final year undergraduate students and postgraduate students on taught programmes are invited to participate in an online survey. Institutions select an appropriate fieldwork period of three weeks within a defined two month period that is agreed nationally. This reflects variation in academic calendars and competing demands on students’ time. The national response rate has increased steadily from 10.9% in 2013 to 28.0% in 2018, contributing to a cumulative evidence base of more than 163,000 responses.

Results from the survey are used increasingly widely within institutions to inform discussions relating to teaching and learning, quality assurance, and structured interactions with state agencies, for example, for institutional review and for strategic dialogue. Examples of feedback and uses of data are provided at <http://studentsurvey.ie/survey-results/> and in short video commentaries from practitioners at <http://studentsurvey.ie/videos/>.

## **2. Rationale for implementation of a survey for postgraduate research students**

As noted previously, the established ISSE survey is open to undergraduate students in first and final years of their programmes and to postgraduate students pursuing taught programmes. Pre-testing of survey questions in advance of the 2013 pilot identified the fact that the (then draft) questions were





relevant to these student cohorts but that the questions did not relate to the experience of postgraduate research students. Therefore, research students were not invited to participate in subsequent fieldwork.

The national steering group made a commitment at that time to develop a survey, in due course, which would be suitable to measure the experiences of postgraduate research students. Implementation of the ISSE survey (for taught students), and uses of the resulting data, have become well established and increasingly embedded in the higher education landscape in Ireland. The benefits of an evidence base which includes consistent items for each institution, for similar institution-types, and for all national participants have become increasingly visible to institutional leaders, academic staff, students and policy-makers. The absence of a comparable evidence base for postgraduate research students ensured that there was significant interest in the decision to revisit the commitment to develop a survey for research students.

This development occurs in the context of increasing policy interest and aspirations for research as illustrated by the *National Framework for Doctoral Education*, the *Irish Universities' PhD Graduate Skills Statement*, and the *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Research Degree Programmes*.

### **3. Approach adopted**

Development of a new survey for postgraduate research students was informed by experiences of the approaches adopted to implement the survey for taught students. Early consideration of that project identified that two key elements were likely to be important for success: partnership and learning from effective practice elsewhere

#### **3.1 Partnership**

The unique partnership structure put in place across the higher education sector to manage, direct and implement the survey project has proved highly effective. The project is co-sponsored by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI).

The HEA ([www.heai.ie](http://www.heai.ie)) is the statutory funding authority for the state higher education sector and is the advisory body to the Minister for Education and Skills in relation to the sector. The IUA ([www.iua.ie](http://www.iua.ie)) is the representative body for Ireland's seven universities. THEA ([www.thea.ie](http://www.thea.ie)) is the representative body for Ireland's fourteen Institutes of Technology. USI ([www.usi.ie](http://www.usi.ie)) is the national representative body for students in higher education. A national steering group maintains strategic direction for the survey project and consists of representatives of co-sponsoring bodies, participating institutions and the statutory quality assurance agency, Quality and Qualifications Ireland ([www.QQI.ie](http://www.QQI.ie)).

The collaborative partnership approach, which was already in operation for the taught ISSE, was enthusiastically extended to development of the new survey for PG research students. This approach ensured that the expectations, concerns and aspirations of multiple stakeholders were addressed. This



collaboration has already achieved a more comprehensive and embedded approach than any individual actor could achieve.

A specific working group of institutional representatives and co-sponsoring organisations was established in order to:

- undertake research on national and international examples of surveys used to capture data on the experiences of students undertaking postgraduate research
- design a survey instrument that effectively meets the needs of postgraduate research students, institutions and other stakeholders, and to test its validity and reliability
- recommend which cohorts of students should be invited to participate and how frequently the survey should be implemented
- recommend any preferred timelines and logistical approaches to survey implementation, the return of data to institutions and any data analysis / structure undertaken prior to that return
- maximise understanding and awareness within partner organisations by dissemination of information on survey rationale, development and implementation

The working group is chaired by a member of the national ISSE steering group and the new survey was titled “ISSE for postgraduate research students”, or “ISSE-PGR”, in order to clearly communicate that it is closely linked to the ethos, aims and operational practices of the known ISSE survey for taught students. The explicit visibility of the four co-sponsoring organisations was designed to clearly signal the collaborative intent and, importantly, the active support of each organisation. It was felt important to reiterate this context as the new ISSE-PGR initiative was communicated to stakeholders who would have, previously, only limited interaction with the established survey.

The specific working group established to research and develop the ISSE-PGR consisted of members from partner institutions and agencies with particular responsibilities for postgraduate research students. A PhD student was included in the group to ensure that the student perspective was incorporated into discussions. The holder of the newly created postgraduate portfolio with the national students’ union will also join the group.

### **3.2 Based on effective national and international survey practice**

Desk research was undertaken on national and international examples of surveys for research students. The working group determined that, in line with existing ISSE approaches, the focus of any survey instrument should be on student engagement and experiences. A conscious decision was made to balance the needs and aspirations of project partners by developing a survey appropriate to the experience of PG research students in Ireland, whilst also seeking to create / maintain some elements of comparison with international measurements where possible. In that context, the group sought to research, compare and contrast a range of existing surveys offered to PG research students.



The final question set used for the ISSE-PGR pilot in 2018 share many common items with the UK Postgraduate Research Experience survey (PRES) whilst also including items specific to the national context, such as elements of the *National Framework for Doctoral Education*.

Students are asked over seventy questions about their experiences during their research degree. Questions address each of the following aspects of the student experience:

- Research Infrastructure and Facilities
- Supervision
- Research Culture
- Progress and Assessment
- Research Skills
- Other Transferable Skills
- Responsibilities and Support
- Motivations
- Career Aspirations
- Overall Experience

For most questions, students respond by selecting the most appropriate response from the options provided, with the most frequent response scales ranging from 'definitely disagree' to 'definitely agree'. Each aspect (section of the questionnaire) also includes a question seeking any additional open text comments.

Response data is provided for each institution, institutions with large or small postgraduate research population sizes, and overall nationally. This data can be analysed by many variables such as gender, part-time or full-time, field of study, national or non-national, Master or PhD etc.

A number of processes were undertaken to test the validity and reliability of the survey instrument. These included expert review, focus groups, cognitive interviews and post-fieldwork reliability tests on the resulting data. Focus groups and cognitive interviews were conducted in five Universities and four Institutes of Technology with a representative range of disciplines, research Masters and PhD students and differing sizes of institutions. The vast majority of students found no issues, or only minor issues, when completing or understanding the purpose of the questionnaire. The wording of some individual questions was amended to make them more culturally appropriate to the Irish higher education system or to clarify the intention of the question. Questions about Supervision were moved within the questionnaire

Post-fieldwork validity tests are being undertaken on the resulting data. These include review of headline results, comparison with other data sources within institutions, and comparison with published results from the UK Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. Headline results have been explored through expert review and discussion and they appear to largely reflect existing perceptions of the experiences of the postgraduate research student cohort. Further testing will include detailed consultation with institutions when institutional data has been analysed and interpreted in greater detail.



### **3.3 Based on effective operational practice**

Operational matters (such as delivery of invitations to take part to students from target cohorts, promotion of the benefits of their participation, design of templates for reporting results and return of anonymised data) were designed to build upon existing practice for the survey for taught students. This practice was determined as part of a full review of the pilot for that survey in 2013 and has been refined over multiple iterations. This enabled institutions' staff and student representatives to extend existing practice to the "new" cohort of postgraduate research students and to leverage expertise and experience within their own institutions. It is felt that this model contributed to high response rate for the pilot survey.

### **4. Current status**

Implementation of the pilot national postgraduate research survey is regarded as successful with positive response rates from the target student population. Twenty four institutions participated in the 2018 national pilot and 2,983 postgraduate research students responded to the survey, representing 32.5% of the target population. Institutions received anonymised results for their students two months after the conclusion of all fieldwork nationally. A full report of the ISSE-PGR pilot will be published in November 2018.

Student confidentiality has been given significant consideration in the context of relatively small target populations in smaller institutions or in specialised disciplines. It is regarded as essential that students feel sufficiently confident to report accurately on their experiences. It is, nevertheless, potentially challenging to identify the appropriate balance between this key principle and providing institutions with sufficiently disaggregated data to enable focussed discussion and potential action in order to support enhancement activities.

Institutions have received results which present collated percentage responses for those questions with defined response options, and anonymised free text responses to questions seeking additional comments. Quantitative results have been presented for Research Masters (NFQ Level 9 / EQF Level 7) and for PhD (NFQ Level 10 / EQF Level 8) cohorts. Each institution receives results for its own students, collated results nationally, and collated results for respondents in institutions with total postgraduate research populations of more than 250 and with populations of less than 250. This enables each institution to analyse its own results alongside the national results and alongside a broad comparator grouping based on postgraduate research population size. Open text comments have been cleaned to remove any names which may have been included and are provided without any other demographic data. Additional analysis of data may be undertaken by the project manager, confidentially and solely by request of an institution. Additional access to disaggregated data may be requested by senior institutional personnel on signature of a specific agreement on student confidentiality. These protocols are regarded as necessary to ensure due consideration of these matters within institutions, particularly for the pilot phase of the project.

In addition to open text questions associated with each aspect of the survey, a specific question was included which asked students for their views on the survey itself. 463 students provided responses to this question, representing 15.5% of total respondents. The most frequent comments include positive



reactions to the development of a survey for postgraduate research students, suggestions to include questions relating to mental health or wellbeing, and various funding-related issues.

## 5. Next steps

A sub-group has drafted a report on implementation of the pilot survey for postgraduate research students. The report describes the process of research, development and implementation for the new survey and includes headline results as well as an evaluation of the process to date. The full report will be published in November 2018. The final text was circulated to participating institutions in advance of formal publication in order to facilitate discussion at relevant committees and, therefore, to prompt feedback to students before, and to coincide with, publicity generated by publication of the national report. Participating institutions are committed to providing feedback to postgraduate research students using similar methods to those employed for data generated by the survey for taught students. These include email, posters, briefing sessions for student representatives, and workshops with staff and students to explore the data.

The working group proposes to undertake a series of consultation and evaluation activities in order to inform plans for future surveys. From initial analysis of feedback, the group may consider the addition of a small number of questions to explore mental health / wellbeing. It is currently anticipated that the first “non-pilot” iteration of the ISSE-PGR will run in 2019 in order to build upon learning from the pilot and to help to embed operational practices into institutional calendars. All postgraduate research students in participating institutions were invited to take part in the pilot survey. Differing perspectives have been expressed about the frequency with which a survey of postgraduate research students should be conducted.

The presentation will reflect on how the partnership has approached implementation of an instrument to capture the experiences of postgraduate research students, how effectively the partnership model operates, and comment on lessons learned from the process. Continuing challenges will be identified and a number of questions posed for consideration by international peers.

## References

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#### **Questions for discussion:**

The following questions are proposed to prompt further discussion and reflection.

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of the approach taken in Ireland to development of a national survey instrument for postgraduate research students?
- Do similar instruments exist in other countries? What are the reasons for these? What lessons can be learned from these?
- How should the aspirations of institutions for detailed resulting data be balanced alongside the importance of ensuring student confidentiality?

*Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 24 July 2018 to [QAForum@eua.eu](mailto:QAForum@eua.eu). The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith\_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.*