National Student Engagement Programme

Clár Rannpháirtíochta Náisiúnta na Mac Léinn

Pilot Institutional Analysis Report
April 2017

Introduction

The National Student Engagement Programme was established by the Higher Education Authority, Quality and Qualifications Ireland and the Union of Students in Ireland in 2016. The programme, referred to as NStEP, began with a 12-month pilot involving five institutions undertaking two pieces of work, a student training programme and an analysis of institutional practices. This report outlines the outputs of the institutional analysis sessions which have informed the establishment of five new national work streams.

Methodology

The analysis sessions were conducted with staff and students in each of the institutions and facilitated by consultants to NStEP, Eve Lewis and Simon Varwell of Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland (sparqs) with support from the NStEP Coordinator.

Date	Institution	Facilitators
November 9th 2016	National College of Ireland	Eve Lewis, Cat O'Driscoll
February 7th 2017	Letterkenny Institute of Technology	Eve Lewis, Cat O'Driscoll
February 9th 2017	NUI Galway	Eve Lewis, Cat O'Driscoll
March 2nd 2017	Waterford Institute of Technology	Simon Varwell, Cat O'Driscoll
March 16th 2017	Cork Institute of Technology	Simon Varwell, Cat O'Driscoll

The sessions took place is a full day workshop format with student and staff participants from across the institution working in groups for much of the day. Efforts to ensure groups were balanced across work roles, units and experience enabled excellent group discussions in each institution.

The work shop contained the following components:

1. **Context to Student Engagement in Ireland -** Introduction to NStEP and the Principles of Student Engagement
2. **About Student Engagement** - Introduction to Student Engagement
3. **Exploring Partnership -** Activities discussing Student Partnership and Students' Unions
4. **Where are we now** - Analysis using the Student Engagement Framework for Scotland card sort tools developed by sparqs
5. **Moving forward** - Identification of themes which arose in the analysis and the creation of priorities within the themes
6. **Messaging the work –** Identification of the groups needed to progress the priorities

The outputs from the sessions took three forms: card sort allocations, draft strategies and feedback on the session.

- The card sort exercise results identified areas that are in need of attention and the results can be in the attached excel.
- The draft strategies are one page plans for themes identified from the card sort exercise.
- The feedback on the session was fed into remaining sessions.

Identified Priorities

National Priorities
The following topics were identified as areas to be addressed at the national level.

External Quality Assurance
The awareness of student involvement in Quality procedures is very limited with a small number of groups indicating it is not currently important. Student involvement in external review processes needs to be examined and promoted. The development of the National Student Reviewers Pool should help with this area of work but awareness amongst staff and students also needs improvement.

Students at the National Level
Many of the analysis sessions showed a knowledge gap in the involvement of students in national boards, groups and decision making processes. This will need to be addressed by all the stakeholders at the national level.

Collaboration at the National Level
There is an appetite for collaboration between different institutions and agencies. The need for case studies, best practice guidelines and facilitation was noted in many sessions under the 'national' heading. The establishment of a Student Engagement Network with an online platform will provide the space for such exchanges.

Local Priorities at the National Level

The following topics were identified as areas to be addressed at institutional level with national support by a majority of the pilot institutions.

1. The Class Rep Role

The main areas identified in the analysis sessions were the definition of the Class Rep Role, recognition of the role and support or retention systems. It is widely agreed that most class reps do not understand the full scope of the role when they are recruited or elected. The definition of a role and creation of a 'job specification' has been suggested in many of the analysis workshops. The timing and methodology of class rep recruitment will also need to be considered. A number of sessions also defined the need for monitoring and mentoring systems. The issue of recognising or rewarding the work of class reps has begun an interesting debate with many options available for consideration including accreditation, non-accredited certification, digital badging and monetary rewards.

This topic has been selected by the National Working Group as one of the five new national level work streams. A pilot institution will be identified to lead a project team to complete an 18-month work plan resulting in best practice guidelines and supports.

2. Student Experience

The suggestions and issues identified under 'Student Experience' varied across institutions which is understandable for such a broad term. The commonalities focused on the use and availability of student experience data, engaging more of the student body, improving dialogue across the different staff roles and students and the need to value and support more initiatives which enhance the student experience.

While this is a very important area of work the National Working Group did not select it as an individual work stream. This decision was motivated by the recognition of the current work in this area across the sector and understanding that improvements will be found in addressing other specific areas at the national level such as enhancing student involvement in decision making.

3. Engaging student beyond class reps

This topic took slightly different forms in the outputs from different groups across the institutional sessions. Many cited the need for more accessible opportunities for students who do not have representative roles to engage in feedback and developmental processes. Other areas noted were the selection of students for Quality Assurance reviews and the turnout in Students' Union elections. A broader theme of skills development for students who volunteer also came up in a number of pilot institutions

This topic was also deemed inappropriate as an individual national work stream as developments in other more specific areas will enhance the engagement of students.

4. Programme Design, Development and Review

There were a number of structural and cultural issues identified in this area with the inclusion of students in programme design and review very limited in the pilot institutions. The communication with students about programme developments triggered by their feedback is often ineffective. The accessibility, reliability and sometimes the gathering of student feedback at the programme or module level is a common barrier to enhancement and partnership.

This topic has been combined with student engagement in programme delivery to create one national work stream on the Design, Review and Delivery of programmes. This work stream will look into the barriers to student engagement in formal processes at the programme level and create guidelines for enhancing the engagement of students in the design, development, delivery and review of programmes.

5. Programme Delivery

Student-centred approaches to programme delivery came up as suggestions in several analysis sessions. These include providing students with options to choose in assignments and assessments, involving students in pedagogical approached and discussions on different teaching and learning styles. A number of issues were raised in different sessions about the feedback students receive on their work and the opportunities they have to provide feedback on their learning experience.

This topic will be addressed in the Design, Review and Delivery of programmes national work stream

6. Student Feedback Methodology

Trust is a difficult topic to quantify but is very important in student feedback. Both the trust students hold for the feedback mechanisms available to them and the trust staff hold for students and student leaders in accessing student feedback were highlighted in many institutional analysis sessions. The effectiveness of feedback opportunities available to students were deemed to be limited and usually inconsistent in the analysis sessions. Surveys and course boards were the main opportunities noted in the session outputs.

This area was selected as a national work stream to include Student Feedback Opportunities, Data and Follow Up. In making this decision the working group identified the need to confidence to be built with all stakeholders in feedback mechanisms and best practise guidelines will contribute to the Irish Survey of Student Engagement which is continuously improving.
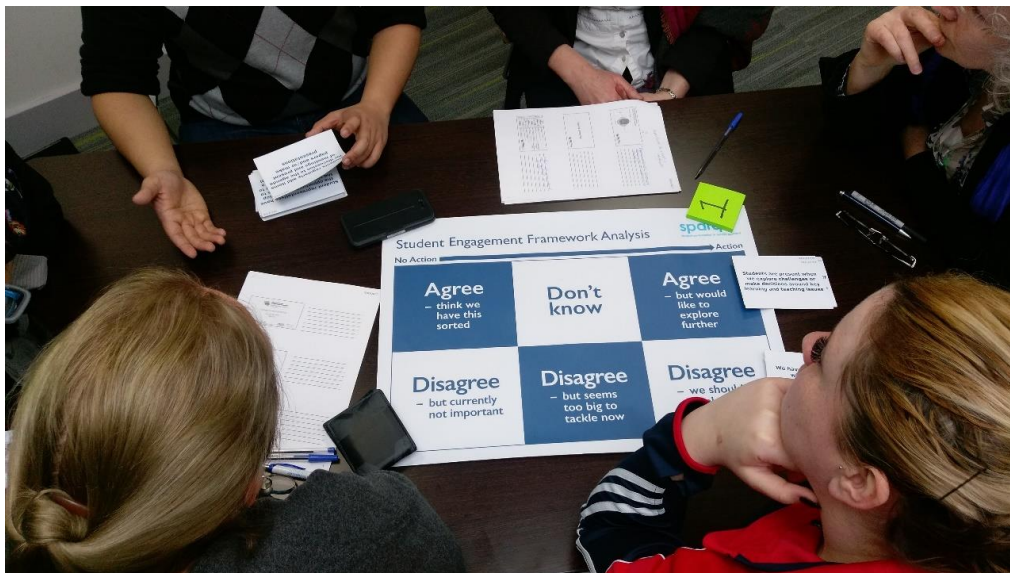
7. Student Feedback Data

Separately to the mechanisms the availability, accessibility and reliability of student feedback data was the focus of many discussions in analysis sessions. Response rates for ISSE and internal surveys were sometimes a barrier to examining the data at a useful level. Students and some staff roles are unable to access most data sets and do not possess the capacity to work with the raw data. Very often the questions for surveys are not designed with students and may miss the priorities students have, when a survey appears irrelevant to students the response rates can be lower.

The work on student feedback data will be completed in the Student Feedback Opportunities, Data and Follow Up work stream.

8. Feedback Loop communications

Following on from the previous topics of feedback mechanisms and feedback data many analysis sessions explored the issues preventing the feedback loop being closed or completed. Often responding actions to feedback are completed without involving or communicating with students, contributing to the low

expectations of students and trust in the feedback mechanisms. Partnership with students to identify issues and design solutions based on the feedback data was identified in some analysis sessions.

This topic will be looked at within the Student Feedback Opportunities, Data and Follow Up work stream.

9. Students in Quality Procedures

Student involvement in formal feedback and review processes was discussed in a number of analysis sessions. It is reported that students are not full members of audit, review and validation panels and their involvement is sometimes tokenistic. The use of inaccessible terminology, intimidating committee structures and timing of meetings were all identified as barriers to meaningful student engagement in formal quality structures.

This topic will be included in the Students in formal system level procedures, strategy and decision making work stream. NStEP is also establishing a national student reviews pool which will make trained student reviewers available to institutions for peer review panels in external and internal reviews and programme validations.

10. Student Body organisation

Students' Union structures were examined in many institutional analysis sessions. The timing and turnout for elections, the diversity of SU executive members and effectiveness of the representation structures were often deemed to have room for improvement.

This area was not selected as a national work stream as the Union of Students in Ireland supports this work in Students' Unions and provides a number of training events throughout the year.

11. Students in Institutional Decision Making

Students' Unions in every pilot institution have seats on most of the decision-making committees and boards yet the effectiveness of their engagement is inconsistent and often tokenistic. The short-term limits of elected student representatives and inconsistent handover arrangements between officers can be a barrier to student leaders engaging fully in discussions and decisions. Staff support came up as a solution in some of the analysis sessions.

This topic has been combined with Students in Quality Procedures and Students in Development and Planning to create the Students in formal system level procedures, strategy and decision making work stream.

12. Students in Institutional development and planning

The development of strategic plans can run across a number of Students' Union Officer terms. Students may only be included in the work in a tokenistic manner with little impact. This work can also be inaccessible to students when terminology, policies and strategies that are new to them are the foundation of discussions. It was also noted that many developments are closed from students until they reach the committee which approves or votes on decisions.

The national work stream Students in formal system level procedures, strategy and decision making will investigate this area.

13. Staff Roles and Responsibilities

The role of staff in student engagement was highlighted in a number of ways in analysis sessions. Firstly, the awareness of and interaction with student representation structures among staff was reported as poor. Secondly the lack of time and training staff have for student engagement is a limiting factor. Finally, the articulation of student engagement in most staff roles is missing.

The National Working Group decided to dedicate a national work stream to Staff Roles and Capacity Building whilst recognising the need to embed this theme across all work streams. This works stream will investigate the roles and needs of staff and suggest new initiatives such as Student Engagement training for Committee and Board chairpersons.

Conclusions

In a number of themes identified as institutional priorities the need for external support was referenced. This support was mainly in the form of training, case studies and facilitation. From the thirteen themes identified the following five future work streams were determined by the April 5th meeting of the National Working Group.

1. The Role and Recruitment of Class Representatives
2. The Design, Review and Delivery of Programmes
3. Student Feedback Opportunities, Data and Follow Up
4. Students in formal system level procedures, strategy and decision making
5. Staff Roles and Capacity Building

Next Steps

A follow up briefing will be circulated shortly to outline the structure and aims of each work stream.

Each work stream will be led by a pilot institution with support from the NStEP Coordinator. Consultancy will be provided from sparqs.

Each work stream will have a project group to progress the work, this will be open HEIs newly signed up to the National Student Engagement Programme in addition to the pilot institutions, agencies and national experts.

A work plan will be agreed by each project team and different presentation and dissemination opportunities will be provided throughout the work plan including the November 2017 launch of the National Student Engagement Network and the NStEP Conference in March 2018.