

A Vision for Partnership - USI Student Engagement Policy

Definition

Partnership is framed as a process of student engagement, understood as staff and students learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement.

In this sense partnership is a relationship in which all participants are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together. This approach recognises that engaged student learning is positively linked with learning gain and achievement. It argues that partnership represents a sophisticated and effective approach to student engagement because it offers the potential for a more authentic engagement with the nature of learning itself, and the possibility for genuinely transformative learning experiences.

Aim of this policy

The aim of this policy is to guide USI's representations on student engagement, and to provide a structured approach to implementing student partnership as a model for student engagement.

Scope of this policy

This policy relates to student partnership as a model for student engagement in teaching and learning and institutional governance. While students may be engaged as partners in other aspects of their college experience, this policy is a response to specific developments in these specific arenas of student life.

Policy statements

1. USI is in favour of partnership as the model for student engagement in colleges in Ireland.
2. USI shall support its member organisations in achieving partnership within their respective institutions.
3. USI shall work with the relevant agencies and authorities to provide a national programme of training for student representatives at all levels.
4. USI shall lobby the government for the establishment of a Sparqs-style agency to support the participation of students in Ireland in teaching and learning.
5. USI shall work with external bodies active in the field of student partnership to help advance expertise within the Irish system.
6. USI shall work with NUS-USI on mutual objectives relating to student partnership.
7. USI shall reject and lobby against the implementation of models of student engagement that are not based on the principles of student partnership.
8. USI endorses the principles for student engagement proposed by the HEA working group on student engagement: that institutions ought to be democratic in a holistic sense; that students should be partners in their learning; that engagement should be inclusive, diverse, and transparent; that students should be considered as co-creators of curriculum; that engagement be on the basis of collegiality, parity of esteem, self-criticism and enhancement; that all parties behave professionally and are supported in doing so; that feedback is acted upon and the "feedback loop" closed; that values underpinning student engagement are consistent.

Responsibility

The VP/Academic shall be responsible for implementing this policy and shall submit progress reports to National Council. The VP/Academic shall compose and circulate a guide to implementing student partnership at an institutional level at or before the August meeting of National Council.

Background

Engaging students and staff effectively as partners in learning and teaching is arguably one of the most important issues facing higher education in the 21st century. Students as partners is a concept which interweaves through many other debates, including assessment and feedback, employability, flexible pedagogies, internationalisation, linking teaching and research, and retention and success.

Interest in the idea has proliferated in policy and practice in the UK and internationally, particularly in the last few years. Wider economic factors and recent policy changes are influencing a contemporary environment in which students are often positioned as passive consumers of, rather than active participants in, their own higher education. It is timely for students in Ireland to take stock and distil the current context, underlying principles and directions for future work on students as partners in learning and teaching.

In 2015 the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) instructed that “institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.” As Irish guidelines are based off the provisions of European Frameworks, the ground is clearly laid at European level for a partner-led approach.

The *National Student Engagement Programme* is a collaborative initiative under development by the Union of Students in Ireland in partnership with the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). Two strands of work were brought together to contribute to the design of the programme:

1. HEA Working Group on Student Engagement

In 2014, the USI President made a presentation to the board of the HEA on the subject of student engagement, detailing the negative experience of student representatives in their institutions. In response, the HEA established a working group to address the issue, chaired by Professor Tom Collins. The group concluded its work in 2016 with the publication of partnership-based “Principles for Student Engagement”.

2. USI Visit to Sparqs Summer Residential Training

In August 2015 a USI delegation (the VP/Academic and representatives from TCDSU, NUIGSU, and ITBSU) attended a three-day training event run by Student Participation in Quality Scotland (Sparqs). Attendance was funded by QQI. Subsequent discussion addressed the relative lack of capacity of Irish student representatives and how a Scottish model for student training might be imported to an Irish context.

There are two key strands of work involved in the national programme as follows:

1. A National Student Training Programme

Working with students’ unions and institutions on a pilot basis to develop the materials, processes, and support requirements to deliver a common course student representative

training programme that will inform the implementation of a comprehensive student training programme at a national level.

2. Developing Institutional Capacity

Working with pilot institutions to help them assess their current student engagement activities and to identify areas for enhancement towards improved practice.

Five institutions will participate in the pilot institution in 2016/17.