

USI Training Policy

As the national representative organisation for third-level students in Ireland, the Union of Students in Ireland has had a significant role in the design and delivery of training for students' union representatives. For the purposes of this policy, "representatives" encompasses student activists, as well as officers at all levels from class representative to full-time sabbatical. The scope of this policy is to direct how training is to be provided to the primary representatives of Member Organisations (MOs), regardless of their status as either part- or full-time representatives.

1. Principles

The training that USI provides to representatives must be:

- **Effective:** Related to representatives' context in terms of need and responsibility;
- **Flexible:** Occurring on a strategic and as-needs basis, at an accessible regional level;
- **Practice-based:** Supportive of the significant "on the job learning" that occurs across terms;
- **Supported:** Training must be supported by the representatives receiving it.

USI's training should be based on a "communities of practice" model of engagement. Communities of practice are groups of people bound together by a common set of interests and a passion for a common cause who interact together on an ongoing basis. Communities of practice have been shown to form within an organisation or across organisations, are frequently informal, with fluctuating membership, and differ from formal work groups, teams or informal networks in that they emphasise the development of members' capabilities and the building and exchange of knowledge and experience.

As a confederate organisation that brings together groups of people with identifiable common interests, USI operates and is operated by communities of practice. These communities of practice arise from the fundamental structure of students' unions, whereby officers within unions are responsible for specific briefs that share similar job descriptions to roles held by representatives in other students' union. They are provided for within the organisational structure (Officer board positions generally reflect structures in place in local students unions; National Council hosts working groups for officers with common briefs) and are of huge value to the work of the Officer board. Conversely, designated members of the Officer board facilitate the sharing of knowledge between officers and arrange for those officers to receive training.

2. Making Training Relevant

To be effective, training has to be related to helping representatives' performance improve and helping students' unions achieve their goals. This connection helps ensure that representatives are motivated to learn and that the limited resources for training are focused on areas that will directly help representatives and their MOs to succeed.

USI needs to introduce steps to support and direct training activities which meet individual and organisational needs and are appropriate to the representative and their context. This shall be achieved by a systematic approach to conducting an analysis of individual learning needs.

An individual-focused approach to assessing training needs will enable the Officer board to:

- Identify what skills and abilities representatives already have
- Identify what skills and abilities are required but are not available
- Identify what current training and development opportunities are available externally
- Identify gaps in the current training and development options
- Identify what training and development is required to address the gaps
- Increase the performance of representatives, organisations and the student movement as a whole.

Members of the outgoing Officer board shall meet with incoming officer teams on an individual basis in order to parse the job-readiness of representatives. Such an analysis should consider, at a minimum:

1. Prior experience and training (occupational, from their college experience, or from participation in student life);
2. The demands of their specific working context;
3. Identified objectives for the year;
4. Their perception of their strengths and weaknesses.

They shall submit a report on learning needs to the VP/Campaigns by the end of their term, and on that basis the VP/Campaigns shall design an indicative calendar of training events for the year. The frame of reference for the calendar shall be, in order:

1. Mandates issued by Congress
2. Items agreed by National Council
3. Additional needs identified by members of Officer board during the analysis of training needs

The training calendar shall be submitted to the first meeting of National Council for amendment and approval.

3. Ensuring Flexibility

Because not all challenges can be predicted, learning needs to occur on both a strategic and an as-needs basis. An analysis of learning needs based on experience prior to assuming a position will naturally be contradicted or changed by events that occur during the year. Moreover, members of the Officer board need the flexibility to pursue new opportunities to provide trainings that are relevant and opportune but not mandated by Congress. To ensure flexibility in the training calendar, Officer board shall ensure:

1. That the training calendar is front-loaded, to take advantage of the lower-intensity summer period (for sabbatical officers) and early Autumn (for part-time officers) and allow for the occasional weekend training session.
2. That the training calendar is issued as indicative rather than prescriptive, and is subject to amendment based on the agreement of the relevant parties;
3. That training can be provided in response to the identified need of student representatives, even if that training was not identified as necessary in the initial analysis.
4. That training is provided on a regional basis in addition to national events.

4. Facilitating Practice-Based Learning

Because the appropriate level of tacit knowledge is difficult to acquire in training programmes, USI needs to support informal and experiential “on-the-job” learning that occurs through mentoring, crossover training, and job experiences. USI shall facilitate practice-based learning by:

1. Dedicating a portion of National Council working group activity to reflection on practice, and organising bespoke reflective sessions;
2. Encouraging representatives to share reflections on their experiences in the relevant fora;
3. Facilitating crossover training between representatives where required, and enabling these officers to facilitate crossover within their union.

5. Developing a culture of enhancement

One of the most significant risks to the full, training-based development of students' union representatives is the absence of these representatives from sessions aimed at enhancing their abilities. This can occur due to lack of interest, the irrelevance of training sessions, unavailability on specific dates, or the failure of Officer board to convince representatives as to the importance of training. USI Officer board shall ensure greater appreciation for the role of training in a successful term as a representative by:

1. Ensuring, through the processes outlined above, that training provided by USI is relevant to those participating in it;
2. Prioritising representative training, particularly in the early stages of the year;
3. Linking training to organisational objectives and strategy.

6. Evaluating Training

All USI training activities shall be evaluated by participants in a survey conducted by the officer with responsibility for comparative research:

1. USI will offer all training participants to evaluate training exercises of the training having taken been completed;
2. Evaluation shall ascertain, at a minimum, overall satisfaction and relevance of training to role and learning needs;
3. The officer with responsibility for comparative research shall submit a report on feedback, incorporating recommendations for future training, to all respondents (where possible) within two weeks of feedback having been submitted. These reports shall be filed appropriately and made available during crossover.

Implementation

1. Training of representatives is a union development activity. The VP/Campaigns shall take overall responsibility for USI's training provision as outlined by this document.
2. Where relevant, the VP/Campaigns will be assisted and advised in implementing these policies by the officer board.
3. The VP/Campaigns shall report to National Council at the final meeting of the calendar year as to progress in implementing these policies.
4. Long-term implementation of these policies will involve phasing out the submission to Congress of motions mandating individual trainings to be organised. In order to ensure that training can be developed efficiently and delivered effectively, the VP/Campaigns shall work with MOs to ensure that new proposals for training activity are proposed as an amendment to the Training Policy.

Avoiding Pitfalls

Motivation for training

Training should not be provided for the sake of providing training, and the training calendar must be directly linked to a robust analysis of training needs. An effective needs analysis will

take the wishes of officers into account but only as a part of the whole process. Members of Officer board must ensure that the learning needs analysis concentrates on current and future skill and capability levels.

Generalities

If the application of the learning analysis is not rigorous, the data collected is prone to producing generalities. Phrases such as “improved communications skills” and “enhanced leadership skills” will be used to describe skill gaps. While these may represent genuine learning needs, the shallowness of the analysis makes them difficult to address effectively. Members of Officer board must ensure that the analysis they conduct enables a critical examination of needs in order to produce more detailed instruction.

Focus on training over learning

There is a distinction between training and learning that has been articulated throughout this policy. Student representative learning takes place through a wide variety of experiences, only one of which would be a training module. Members of Officer board must ensure that they do not see learning needs only in terms of training modules. Learning needs are often best met by improving processes, introducing new technology, providing mentoring etc.

Focus on only technical or task-specific learning

When analysing the workload of a students’ union representative, it is easy to concentrate on obvious physical and technical behaviours and competencies. Representatives may often express the same limited view on what the important skills required to do the job effectively are. However, softer skills are often critical to this line of work. These include interpersonal skills, team-working skills, decision-making skills and problem-solving skills. Members of Officer board must ensure their analysis uncovers these less observable but functionally vital competencies.

“One Size Fits All”

Everyone has a unique learning style, with different behavioural patterns, attitudes, outlooks on life and ways of learning. A possible limitation of a learning needs analysis is that everyone will learn in the same way. This might produce a learning plan or training modules with only one way, or limited options to achieve the required learning. Members of Officer board must endeavour to create a training calendar that makes allowances for a broad range of learning preferences.

Quick and Easy

There are so many pressures on student representatives that there never seems to be time to do any job properly. One obvious consequence of this is that an analysis of learning needs could be done briefly, superficially, perhaps through a simple chat or working group discussion item; or only short-term and obvious needs are considered. Such analysis must time as long-term a view as possible and be as comprehensive with the analysis as possible in order to be of maximum effectiveness.

No link with organisational strategy

A huge potential danger is that the Officer board carries out its analysis of learning needs in isolation from broader organisational policy and strategy. The output of a training needs analysis must show clear alignment with the strategies and objectives of the organisation if it is to be worth the Officer board’s while in actioning. The subsequent training and learning programmes must be able to add value to the achievement of broader organisational goals and to take student representation forward in the direction agreed by Congress.