

The Union of Students in Ireland

The Union of Students in Ireland (Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn) is the national representative body for third-level Students' Unions in Ireland. Founded in 1959, USI now represents more than 374,000 students in over thirty colleges across the island of Ireland. The goal of USI is to work for the rights of students and a fair and equal post-secondary education system in Ireland.

USI is a full member of the European Students' Union (ESU) which represents students from 46 National Students' Unions in 39 countries.

Objectives of USI

USI has six key objectives, listed below, that outlines our work to improve the lives of students, and to enhance education and training in Ireland. These objectives are also applicable to postgraduate students, and it is imperative that USI ensures its work is inclusive of those students.

The Objectives are:

1. An education and training system open to all, irrespective of any consideration, including consideration of national origin, ethnic background, age, ability, sex, sexuality, creed, political beliefs or economic circumstances, so that each individual can realize their full potential.
2. An education and training system which truly serves the interest of the people of Ireland.
3. The right of students to a decent standard of living including the right to adequate financial support, proper housing and future prospects of employment in Ireland.
4. The defence and promotion of all democratic and human rights.
5. The provision of student services for the benefit of the membership on the principle that control of student service should lie with the membership.
6. To represent the interests of the students of Ireland at international level.

USI Engagement with Postgraduate Students

USI has a diverse membership, including postgraduate students across various modes of study, and from many different backgrounds. Recognising the need to strengthen our representation of postgraduates is one of the key challenges USI faces going forward, but by embracing that challenge we can enhance the experience of all of our students.

The Union of Students in Ireland currently has a lack of engagement from postgraduate students, and this has inevitably meant that policy and advocacy for this growing cohort has not been at the forefront of the student movement. While there has been some success on the national stage, not least the reinstatement of €4million for postgraduate grants in 2017, it is critical that USI radically changes its approach.

It is imperative that USI act to foster understanding among its membership of the issues that postgraduates face, and that the national student movement is an inclusive one. There is an onus on student leaders and activists to work constructively with one another to foster these relationships, and to ensure the unity and cohesion of the movement itself.

The postgraduate student community is incredibly diverse, not only culturally and socially, but also in mode of study. Traditionally considered an underrepresented group, postgraduates are far from homogeneous. Any work to include postgraduates must reflect the vibrancy of that community of learners, and support the different needs and issues they face. It is therefore crucial that any effort to increase postgraduate representation and engagement reflects this.

In order to highlight that vibrancy, to encourage engagement, and to successfully advocate for them, it's imperative that USI create spaces for postgraduate issues. These spaces must be inclusive of postgraduate students themselves, and should serve three core objectives:

1. To engage postgraduate students directly in their national Union so that they can shape the work that we do, including with our partners.
2. To build the capacity of USI Member Organisations to engage their postgraduates in the work that they do locally.
3. To develop the understanding of USI, and our various partners, on postgraduate student policy matters in order to elevate them to the national discourse.

In order to fundamentally build on these 3 core objectives, USI must determinedly implement a long-term Strategy of postgraduate engagement.

USI Postgraduate Representation

In order to represent postgraduate members, USI must shape change within its own structures.

Actions:

- If financially feasible, and with the assent of Congress, USI should seek to introduce a Vice President for Postgraduate Affairs to the Officerboard.
- USI should map out the potential partners , allies, and other relevant organisations that could support any new Vice President for Postgraduate Affairs in their work.
- USI should organise an annual conference for postgraduate students.
- The USI Postgraduate Representation Network should be resourced and promoted, and should meet more regularly throughout the year, including in the summertime.
- USI should set up an ad hoc Research Committee, that will examine issues of postgraduate research, recognising the need to shape significant policy in this area.
- USI should hold a Postgraduate Affairs Working Group at every National Council.
- USI to ensure that the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) can implement a work stream on postgraduate representation.
- USI should complete the membership process in order to join EURODOC (European Council of Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers), and proactively engage in and learn from their work.
- USI should proactively engage as a member of the National Advisory Forum for Doctoral Education.

- USI should seek membership of relevant committees and bodies that examine and decide on postgraduate student issues.
- USI should ensure that IFUT and TUI are inclusive of postgraduate students who work in our Colleges, and should seek a partnership on that basis.

Students' Union (MO) Support

In order to truly engage postgraduate members, it is important that USI makes every effort to support and encourage Member Organisations (MOs) to reach out to their postgraduate students, while recognising that the needs and experiences of each MO varies.

Actions:

- There should be a set of modules at Students' Union Training (SUT) delivered on postgraduate student issues, with a clear set of learning outcomes to ensure Sabbatical Officers can support postgraduates.
- Resources should be created for Sabbatical Officers on key issues of postgraduate student casework.
- USI should support Students' Union to improve their democratic structures to include postgraduate representation on the Union Executive, in Faculties, Schools, Departments etc.
- Advise and support MOs on creating inclusive events and ensuring regular contact with postgraduate members, recognising the multicultural and global nature of the postgraduate community.
- Work with MOs and the postgraduate community to utilise research and discipline specific expertise among postgraduate students in MO and national campaigns.
- Include specific focus on engaging part-time postgraduate students.

Students' Union Partnership with Higher Education

Institutions

In the development of this Strategy, communications and relationships between Students' Unions and their institutions, was identified as a particular barrier to postgraduate engagement. USI should work to foster this important partnership.

Actions:

- Produce guidance on the need for communication with staff and offices who work primarily with postgraduate students, including the benefits of building and maintaining those relationships.
- Produce guidance on postgraduate inductions and orientations that can most effectively include the Students' Union and their message.
- Create guidance on postgraduate inclusive events, and how best to run these in cooperation and partnership with institutional staff.
- Institutions will often have postgraduate specific spaces, and USI will support Students' Unions to ensure they are visible in those spaces.

USI Engagement with Postgraduate Students

USI is well versed at engaging students on and off campuses, and in rolling out campaigns that attract their attention. A series of postgraduate specific and/or inclusive initiatives should be developed.

Actions:

- Any new Vice President for Postgraduate Affairs should be supported to implement initiatives and campaigns targeting postgraduate members.
- USI should 'postgraduate proof' its events and campaigns, recognising that the vast majority of the initiatives USI undertakes are not undergraduate-specific.
- USI should seek to ensure that there are more postgraduate students at its annual Congress.
- USI should monitor postgraduate engagement with each of its events and initiatives.
- USI should implement a postgraduate specific national campaign, that can be flexible and adapt to the issues that are most relevant at any given time.
- Any USI national postgraduate campaign should also be adapted to local MOs who wish to use the branding and roll it out.
- USI should develop resources for MOs to encourage postgraduate students to utilise student support services, recognising that these services are often wrongly viewed as undergraduate-only.

Policy Development

With improved representation and engagement of postgraduate students, USI will be in a much stronger position to develop policy on the issues that affect these students.

There are a number of core actions that should be taken in USI's policy development work in regards to postgraduate students:

- The Union's policy Officers for Academic Affairs, Welfare, and Equality and Citizenship should proactively seek to 'postgraduate proof' the work that they do, recognising that the vast majority of USI's policy work is not undergraduate-specific.
- USI should utilise all representation structures to identify key priorities for the postgraduate student community.
- USI should develop a core hub of policy documents in relation to postgraduate student issues and experience, both for MO and external use.
- Create FAQs for postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students.

There are a number of key areas of policy development that were identified in the creation of this Strategy that USI should adopt as priorities.

Actions:

- Create a USI policy paper on postgraduate funding and access to financial supports.
- Evidence-based policy on teaching and working conditions for postgraduate students in our colleges.
- Inclusion of postgraduate specific issues in placement, work-based learning, and industry based programmes policy work.

- Mapping of key postgraduate student milestones, which can create links between specific issues faced by students.
- Mapping of institutional staff and services, and how they interact with postgraduate students, in order to improve access and experience.
- Examine current practices on postgraduate skills development opportunities.
- Examine the issue of transition to postgraduate study, including the 'fresher' postgraduate, the returning mature postgraduate, and the international postgraduate.
- Develop best practice on issues of supervision and work with relevant external organisations to ensure adoption of these.
- Examine practices on Intellectual Property.
- Examine issues of parental and care leave, including the issue of maternity leave and supports during research, and lobby for change to the relevant organisations.
- Develop policy on the intersection of identity and postgraduate study, including gender and disability.
- International postgraduate students should be proactively included in policy and lobby work on international student issues.

Conclusion

This Strategy represents an ambitious plan for engagement and national advocacy on behalf of the Union of Students in Ireland's diverse membership of postgraduate students, and is a commitment to those students by their national Union.

The implementation of this plan has no specific timelines attached, and should be driven by the identified priorities and needs of the postgraduate members it aims to engage and include.