

Tuairisc an Uachtarán Report of the President

Key Points since last National Council:

- **Positive outcomes at HEA Board/ Ministerial Meeting**
- **Increasing USI's European standing**
- **Successful strategic media comm's RE: Drinkaware**
- **Pink Training was great and so was my moustache**

Mandate Update:

1. Collaboration within Alliances and Regional Clusters// AAQA5 (In progress)
2. Review of Criteria for TU Designation// AAQA10 (In progress)
3. Unpaid Internships// AAQA12 (Completed)
4. Technological University Status// AA1 (2012) (In progress)
5. Technological Universities// AA4 (2012) (In progress)
6. Merging of Higher Education Institutes// AA8 (2012) (In progress)
7. "Your Future Campaign"// ED7 (2011) (In progress)
8. Graduate Employment// ED9 (2011) (In progress)
9. Public-Funding Model// ED11 (2011) (In progress)
10. Postgraduate Loan Scheme// ED21 (2011) (In progress)
11. Student Loans/Graduate Tax// ED 02 (2009) (In progress)
12. Voting at 16// NA 1 (In progress)
13. Reform of the Irish Constitution// NA5 (In progress)
14. Graduate Unemployment & Emigration// NA9 (2012) (In progress)
15. Employability Skills Campaign// NA 12 (2012) (In progress)
16. Rolling Register// NA5 (2011) (In progress)
17. Communicating With Students// UO7 (Partially completed/In progress)
18. Events & Marketing// UO9 (In progress)
19. Part-Time Employment Webpage// UO10 (In progress)
20. Campus Crossover Tour// UO11 (Completed)
21. Affiliate & Non-Affiliate Feedback// UO12 (Ongoing)
22. Freshers' Packs// UO8 (2011) (Completed)
23. Team Building// UO9 (2010) (Partially completed/In progress)
24. Voting Rights for Citizens Living Abroad// CZN4 (2012) (In progress)
25. Graduate Employment Research Project// EM3 (Completed)

- 1. Political Engagement & Lobbying**
- 2. Higher Education Authority**

3. **International Affairs**
4. **Postgraduate Loans**
5. **Referendums**
6. **Media Engagement**
7. **Community Engagement & Fundraising**
8. **SIPTU-USI Agreement/ USI-NERI Funding Policy**
9. **Stakeholder Engagement**
10. **Additional Meetings & Events**

1. Political Engagement & Lobbying

i) Minister Quinn Meeting

The discussions and outcomes from this meeting will be detailed further in a report to National Council.

-> Student Assistance Fund: I made the case for additional funding to be released to the Student Assistance Fund. The Minister committed to consider this matter and revert back with a response.

-> Quality Control Partner Project: The Minister detailed his thoughts on a potential Quality Control Initiative relating to Learning & Teaching standards which could potentially be run through USI. I suggested that a staff member charged with Membership Development & Project Co-ordination could head up the rollout of this project, and that this role could be extended to other areas of quality in student representation, such as the SPARQS and SUEI models for course representatives and Students' Unions in the UK. It was agreed that USI would need to be funded to carry out this work and I agreed to return with a fully fleshed-out project proposal.

-> 'Job Ready Graduate' Programme Proposal: I outlined USI's ideas for this employability project, and this was concept was supported in principle. Again I agreed to further develop the workings of this initiative, and the Minister suggested that Ministers Burton and Sherlock would also have an interest in this type of scheme.

-> Third Level Funding & Sustainability: The Minister's recent meeting with the HEA and the timelines for the HEA Sustainability Report and the concept of student loans were discussed. The Minister outlined that he is yet to be convinced on student loans. I argued USI's policy position on the future of third-level funding. This will continue to be on the agenda for the remainder of my term and likely further.

-> Affordable Postgraduate Loans project: I reported on USI's efforts in meeting with commercial credit institutions in respect of an affordable loan product for postgraduate students. The Minister agreed that the Department would engage with this after these Institutions responded to the criteria set out by USI for the type of product necessary. Some form of State backing in terms of a guarantee may be necessary, and this was accepted.

-> Student Services Funding: I updated the Minister on the report being carried out by the HEA into the Framework for the Student Contribution and any adverse impact on student services

when it comes to funding cuts in HEI's. He agreed to consider the findings and respond to them if necessary.

-> Residency Requirements in HE for Returning Emigrants: The situation facing young people leaving Ireland for 2 years or greater and attempting to return to Higher Education, as to where they do not satisfy residency requirements and may be charged full non-EEA fees was detailed to the Minister. He was extremely sympathetic to this cause and agreed to consider legislation in line with the USI proposal of ensuring anyone who has sat the JC or LC in this country would be considered eligible for Irish fee treatments, following further investigation and research.

-> Education & Training Boards: USI will have a seat on all 16 of the newly-established Education and Training Boards across the country. This will be another valuable avenue of influence for the organisation.

-> Student Consultation & Involvement in the Landscape process: Some of the challenges faced by local SU's this year in respect of autonomy, governance structures in their colleges, representation etc. were discussed. It was agreed that early drafts of new legislation on Governance Structures in HEI's and Mergers & Clusters would be made available to USI for consultation and feedback, and this could reflect and deal with some of these challenges in legislation.

-> DIT Grangegorman & The Catholic Church: A local issue in respect of a State building in DIT Grangegorman being controlled by the Catholic Church was raised. The Minister was not aware of it but agreed to investigate.

-> Student Apprentices: The cuts to student apprentices in the last Budget were discussed. The decision was taken for two reasons- To extract funds from FÁS, and obviously as a balancing the budgets exercise. While these cuts will apply for 2014, the Minister stated that he would be open to reconsidering the funding of apprenticeships in line with the Apprenticeship Review due to be published, in the next Budgetary cycle.

The Minister once again stated his intention to be in attendance at USI Congress 2014, and we agreed to meet again in the New Year. The meeting was then closed.

ii) Student Assistance Fund

Having received responses from **A SMALL NUMBER** of colleges, I have spent a considerable portion of time in the past couple of weeks attempting to secure additional funds for the SAF. The small sample size that I was working off suggested a large increase in demand even without much of the SUSI-related pressures, and most funds being exhausted at this point.

Unfortunately, as an additional €3m had already been made available from the Department to the HEA for the Equity of Access pot at the beginning of the financial year, securing extra monies is proving extremely difficult. This money had been available for transfer to the SAF due to unspent balances in the Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) in previous years. However this has not been the case this year and these additional pressures have led to none of this funding now being available.

At the HEA Board meeting, at my request the HEA agreed to write to the Department recommending that if any funds were available, they should be allocated for this purpose.

This was also raised through the following:

- At a meeting with Tom Boland, HEA Chief Executive
- Peter Browne and Mary Liz-Trant in the HEA
- Minister Quinn's Special Adviser Neil Ward
- Several conversations with Brian Power in the Department's Equity of Access section
- Minister Quinn meeting

It is now being looked at to see if there may be any leftover monies left in the HEA's Strategic Investment Fund which may be transferred across, or if the Department may have anything left in the kitty at the end of the financial year.

Pressure from individual Institutions, which apparently has not been as forthcoming this year, would be helpful in our efforts.

iii) Other Political Meetings

To finalise our contract with Red Flag, the following meetings were arranged for before Christmas:

- Minister Kathleen Lynch RE: Mental Health
- Minister Alex White RE: Alcohol
- Officials in the Dept. of Social Protection RE: Youth Guarantee
- Officials in the Dept. of Housing RE: Student Accommodation Crisis in Dublin

2. Higher Education Authority

Outside of the SAF-related work, it was a busy period in my role on the Higher Education Authority.

On Wednesday November 20th, I met with Tom Boland, Chief Executive of the HEA, and a full Board meeting was held on Tuesday, November 26th. Both national and also some local issues, particularly around funding, were raised at these fora.

I was updated on the meeting held between the HEA and the Department of Education & Skills on the HEA's Sustainability report. It is now due to be published in June, and will form a pivotal part of my role on the Board in the second half of my term.

It was agreed that the meeting regarding grant criteria reform for students living independently would be held early in the New Year.

I was updated on the ongoing review of the Framework for the Student Contribution, which takes in the funding of student services and consultation of Students' Unions in this process.

At both meetings, I raised the issue of the increase in flexible learners and the failure of many HEI's to provide student services to their part-time students and in many cases capitation funding to SU's for their membership. This undermines their fundamental right to representation- This issue is to now be addressed within the Framework review.

An update was furnished on the Strategic Dialogue with Higher Education Institutions as part of the Landscape process. I updated on the development of the DTU Alliance of DIT, IT Tallaght and IT Blanchardstown Students' Unions which is being formed.

The Trinity Provost's recent comments on privatisation were also discussed.

USI's role in the Northern Ireland HE strategy as an all-Ireland organisation was also raised to be investigated by the HEA, particularly in the area of cross-border student mobility.

USI have also now officially been co-opted onto the HEA's Graduate and Research Committee, where I feel it is important we have representation.

A positive outcome was reached in respect of the Audiology issue in AIT, which AIT Students' Union have been notified of.

Finally, Pat Harvey, who is leading the change management processes in the HEA, is to attend National Council in Letterkenny in January to absorb student issues and view challenges in Higher Education from our point of view. He will be attending Education and Presidents' Working Group as well as National Council.

3. International Affairs

From the 27th of November to the 2nd of December, I attended the European Student Union's Board Meeting 65 in Zagreb, Croatia, with the VP for Academic Affairs & Quality Assurance.

USI brought forward resolutions on 'A Living Wage: Fair Pay and Conditions for Young Workers', and 'LGBT Rights in Ireland', which were both very well-received and endorsed.

A USI amendment was accepted to ESU's Plan of Work which called for policy and lobby work on the European Youth Guarantee and support for relevant National Unions on the national implementation of the scheme.

Amendments to the Kaunas Declaration on internationalisation and mobility put forward by USI relating to migrant students, returning emigrants and international students and the flexibility of

admissions policies were also accepted.

We also submitted several internal motions and amendments to ESU's financial strategy, calling for greater transparency in ESU's financial affairs and dealing with the quality of reporting.

Most of all, we developed some superb networks and contacts over the course of the Board Meeting, which I am sure will be of significant assistance to USI in future policy and research work.

The Board Meeting will be further detailed at our report to National Council, and we are also bringing a proposal to NC to investigate the possibility of joining a European Regional Network following on from our experiences at the BM.

4. Postgraduate Loans

A core post-Budget objective was the development of an affordable loan product for postgraduate students.

I set about reviewing all past USI documentation on this issue from sabbatical officer discussions which took place after the Budget 2012 decision to effectively scrap postgraduate fee maintenance and grants, to FOI request responses from the banks and the Department, to minutes from the meetings of the Postgraduate Forum which had then been established.

From this, I designed a set of criteria which would need to be met in order for a product to be something USI may be willing to endorse and promote, which included the interest rate, terms, nature of the guarantee, payback period etc.

I have held meetings with officials in the Bank of Ireland and the Head of Policy and Planning in AIB, both taking place on Monday November 25th, to discuss possibilities in this area and also the draft criteria put forward by USI. They are to revert back with feedback, including with the likely scenario that any product that meets these criteria would require some form of State backing when it comes to the guarantee. Informal discussions have also taken place with the Irish League of Credit Unions.

I have updated the Minister and his officials on the progress we have made so far, as detailed in the report of the Ministerial meeting earlier.

It may be the case that the position taken by the commercial banks in respect of State support when this issue first arose in 2011 may now have changed in light of improved market conditions. The Department have agreed to re-investigate this matter.

5. Referendums

We received notification by GMIT Students' Union that a referendum was to take place on Thursday, December 5th. At the time of writing this referendum has yet to take place, but I will update under my report to NC. My major concern is that of quorum given the timing of the referendum.

We held an Officer Board Planning meeting on November 19th to prepare for this. I was then responsible for drafting the text for all campaign materials and leaflets for the referendum, following this discussion with the team regarding our general messaging and approach. Given my past ties to this Institution, I will offer National Council my resignation if we lose this vote.

The Vice-President for Campaigns and I met with officers from Griffith College Students' Union on November 19th. The meeting was broadly positive and both sides agreed to continue to engage.

Further engagements have taken place with DCU Students' Union, UL Students' Union, and NCAD Students' Union. DCU and NCAD's referendums are likely to take place early in Semester 2. I have been invited to address ULSU's Executive which I will also be doing in the New Year. Finally, I have agreed to meet the President in UCD Students' Union in early Semester 2 to update on progress on internal reforms in USI which had been raised during the course of last year's failed USI referendum.

6. Media Engagement

The following were the headline or key aspects of media engagement carried out in my spokesperson role since my last Report. All of the rest is detailed in your weekly 'News From USI' updates.

Drinkaware

A large amount of my media engagement in the past couple of weeks has been dedicated to the fallout and considerable national and regional media coverage of USI's decision, taken at the last National Council, to cut all ties with the MEAS (Drinkaware) organisation.

I participated in four head to head debates with Fionnuala Sheahan, Drinkaware's CEO, on this matter- On RTÉ Drivetime, Newstalk Breakfast with Ivan Yeats, LMFM Radio and Ocean FM.

A large amount of other national, regional and local news bulletins and talk programmes covered this story, as well as almost all major print outlets and college media.

I believe USI's message was communicated very effectively over the course of this media cycle, and the response has been almost wholly positive to the stance taken by our organisation. I now feel USI are the first time seen as a credible stakeholder in the field of alcohol awareness, and this is attributed to by the range of independent organisations who have contacted us to potentially work with them in the future.

Internships

The topic of Ireland's 'internship culture', forced emigration and Jobbridge exploitation have been extremely prevalent in the media in recent weeks.

I took part in an RTÉ Morning Edition TV piece on emigration, and a Morning Ireland piece on internships, with We're Not Leaving's Moira Murphy.

Other

USI, NUS, and NUS-USI have begun drafting a joint position on the introduction of a 'Living Wage' in the UK and Ireland, following recent discussions in all 3 Parliaments on the matter. This would be the first 'Trilateral' Press Statement of it's kind.

I will also be speaking on Breakfast with Hector on 2FM about USI's efforts as part of the St Vincent de Paul Toy Appeal campaign.

7. Community Engagement & Fundraising

Following the devastation caused in the Philippines by Typhoon Haiwan, we felt a moral obligation to contribute in some small way to the relief efforts helping the victims of this horrific natural disaster.

We therefore organised an Office Bake Sale in aid of Medicines San Frontiers (Doctors Without Borders), as well as setting up an online donations page for SU Officers. All of those sharing our office block sampled the array of baked goods on display, and contributed kindly. Our General Manager's pride at his lemon drizzle cake had him on a high for the rest of the week. The event raised several hundred euro for a great cause that will go directly to assisting MSD's fabulous relief efforts. Thank you to TCD Students' Union for their help with the baking and organising of this event.

I have been working with the Mature Student Society in AIT to organise their Christmas event, which is taking place on the day of National Council this Saturday.

Arrangements have been put in place for the Christmas events in Athlone and Tralee, which include Santa's Grotto, a Xmas-themed bouncy castle, Xmas decorations, face painters, balloon

animals etc.

On November 20th, I attended the St Vincent De Paul's Launch of their Annual Toy Appeal campaign. Since then, all necessary information has been circulated to SU Officers to support them in running their local Toy Appeal campaigns, and I hope the USI's first engagement as a partner on this wonderful initiative is a success.

8. SIPTU-USI Agreement/USI-NERI Funding Policy

I have been working with SIPTU's Head of Organising and also consulting with the Young Workers Network on the terms of the proposed renewed SIPTU-USI Agreement, to be brought to this National Council.

On Friday November 22nd, I participated over the phone in a meeting with Joe Cunningham and Tish Gibbons of SIPTU and Tom Healy of NERI to detail firm arrangements for the development of a Funding Policy in line with USI's position, researched and composed by the Nevin Economic Research Institute, to be ready for USI Congress 2014.

The outlook on this is hugely positive, I genuinely believe we are all signing off the same public-funded model hymn sheet, and I will update more under the relevant agenda item at National Council.

9. Stakeholder Engagement

- -> The General Manager and I assisted the President of IADT Students' Union with a session on finances and management on Tuesday, November 12th.
- -> I visited Maynooth Students' Union on November 12th to support them with plans for their upcoming Constitutional Referendum.
- -> Phone conferences have been held with the Presidents and their nominees in the last number of weeks in the Dublin, Southern, and BMW Regions, to update them on the work USI has been doing and to see if there was any further assistance they required from our team.
- -> I attended Northern Regional Council on November 13th, and presented a report to the Council on work USI has been doing. Congratulations to the NUS-USI President for the hosting of this meeting and the extremely detailed NUS-USI Work Plan which has been developed.

10. Additional Meetings & Events:

- -> USI Pink Training was held from November 22nd to November 24th in Queens' University

Belfast. I would like to commend the VP for Equality & Citizenship on the fantastic work put in to make this event a fantastic success once again.

I delivered an opening address, a rally speech and an LGBT Ally workshop at this event. And yes, my moustache was pink for the 21st Birthday Party. And yes, our General Manager turned into a 90's Game Show host for the 'Pin the Tail on the Putin' party game!

The weekend was genuinely one of the most positive experiences I have had in my time in the student movement, and am I proud it is a cornerstone annual USI event.

-> I attended the More Talk, More Action campaign launch on Monday, November 11th. Again, I want to extend my congratulations to the Deputy President/VP for Welfare, for the outstanding work put in to what I believe is the finest Mental Health campaign ran by USI in my recollection.

-> I attended the HEA's 'How Equal' conference on Equity of Access to Higher Education on November 7th, which was also attended by the Minister. I chaired a session on disability programmes in the afternoon at this event.

-> At the Young People's Assembly held by 'We're Not Leaving' on November 9th, directly after National Council, I acted as an expert on the discussion topic of 'Fee Hikes and Grant Cuts' for both sessions. It was encouraging to see the outcomes of the Charter on this topic to be so broadly in line with USI policy on Higher Education funding. I also attended a follow-up organising meeting of the We're Not Leaving group on 19th November to input as to how USI could continue to engage with WNL.

-> I attended the Dáil debate and vote on Sinn Féin's Private Members Bill on Youth Unemployment and the Youth Guarantee, on Wednesday November 20th. A number of other youth organisations were also present in the Visitors' Gallery. The Bill, needless to say, was defeated.

-> The Day-Long Workshop event with the seminar on 'Young People- Challenging The Crisis' and the planning session on the Value of Education Campaign has been set for Thursday, December 12th in USI HQ.

-> Officer Board was held on Friday, November 15th.

-> Finally, I have also been working with HAYS Recruitment on the design, layout and content of the Jobs.USI.ie microsite (An update on this is to be presented to National Council), and with Carr Communications on support of the USI 'Job Ready Graduate' Project Proposal.