USI Accommodation Strategy 2016-2019



# About USI

 "The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) is the sole representative body for students in Ireland and represents 354,000 students in over thirty member colleges across Ireland, North and South. Throughout its history, USI has worked relentlessly in the pursuit of student rights in all areas of the student experience."

# Objectives of the Union of Students in Ireland1. 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 if Ireland at international level.

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### USI Accommodation Strategy

This strategy aims to provide a framework for good practice for the support of students in seeking accommodation and knowing their rights and obligations, to be implemented by both the Union of Students in Ireland and local Students’ Unions.

The Union of Students in Ireland must follow the USI Accommodation Strategy and assist local officers in following through with its recommendations by disseminating the strategy at the beginning of each year.

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# Collaborations and Partnerships

*USI acknowledges the importance of collaborations and partnerships when it comes to accommodation supports. USI recognises the need to work with others in the sector to further our aims and ambitions.*
 **Objectives:**

* To build support for the work that USI does in the area of accommodation support.
* To develop new initiatives through collaborations with students’ unions and external organisations to support students in seeking accommodation and solving tenancy issues.
* To build a coalition for effective lobbying for investment into purpose built student accommodation.
* To support students in seeking help and advice in relation to accommodation issues and where necessary submit a formal complaint.

# Actions:

* Seek support from external organisations to strengthen campaigns on the issue.
* Collaborate and consult with students’ unions, student groups and external organisations to support and develop new campaigns, resources, research and training.
* Sustain membership to committees, such as PRTB.
* Establish a point of contact within the PRTB and Threshold for Students’ Unions.
* Liaise with various organisations to promote Anti-bullying awareness, disclosure training and any other relevant training to Student Residence staff to ensure that staff are trained and able to deal with any issues that may arise for students living in affiliated Student residences.
* To liaise with the legislation working group to lobby for a reform in digs accommodation rights.
* USI will collaborate with NUS0USI to ensure that where areas of work overlap within their policy file and priorities that the support and execution of specific projects from or with USI is reflected within NUS-USI’s plan of work.

**Suggested Action For Students’ Unions:**

* To aim, where possible, to establish links with local organisations and resources, and promote local supports to students in campus community.
* Maintain a relationship with local residential groups to ensure lines of communication remain open to deal with any anti-social behaviour issues, etc.

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# Training and Supports - Students’ Unions

# *USI encourages students’ unions to run campaigns and/or distribute information to students on accommodation rights and responsibilities.*

# **Objectives:**

* To equip Students’ Unions with the skills and information needed to form campaigns to inform students of their right and responsibilities as tenants.
* To equip officers in their work in relation to accommodation.
* For Students’ Union Officers to be equipped to support fellow students who are experiencing accommodation issues.

**Action:**

* Provide training for relevant officers during the summer term in accommodation issues.
* Support officers in establishing links with local, community based support services.
* Students’ Unions to be equipped with the skills and information necessary to develop and review campus policy and to represent students on management committees.

**Suggested Action for Students’ Unions:**

* Where possible, attend training events promoted or organised by USI.
* Utilise appropriate resources and supports provided through USI or locally by relevant organisations and support services.
* Aim to establish local links with community based services and identify a referral path for students in need.
* Seek, where possible, representation on campus decision making boards/committees in relation to student accommodation.
* Aim to develop and review new or existing accommodation policies.
* Aim to establish a committee to review accommodation issues in instution catchment area.

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# Funding and Availability

*For many students, having affordable and fit-for-purpose accommodation is a prerequisite for attending college. USI recognises accommodation as a right not a privilege. A combination of private sector rent price increases alongside the continuing shortfall in purpose built student accommodation will fuel a non-progression culture in third level education unless immediate action is taken.*

**Objectives:**

* To promote investment in purpose built student accommodation.
* To discourage the discrimination towards student tenants.

**Action:**

* Lobby the Government to prepare a further short term solution such as the use of Nama-owned properties to temporarily ease the accommodation burden.
* Lobby the Government to create a Student Housing strategy to complement the Construction Strategy.
* Lobby for the introduction of a Student Accommodation Trust.
* Lobby the Government to amend part 3 of the Residential Tenancies Act 2004 to include a provision that allows for students’ unions or other representative bodies to have legal standing to challenge on behalf of their membership the introduction of new rents in purpose built student accommodation centres, where those rents are raised outside of term time.
* Lobby the Government to amend the equal status act to include discrimination relating to students in the provision of accommodation as one of the grounds.
* Lobby for student accommodation to be recognised under incentives to build social housing.

**Suggested Action for Students’ Unions:**

* Where possible, partake in lobbying opportunities both nationally and locally and nationally with support from USI.

**Support Services and Information Campaigns***The availability and quality of appropriate campus and community support services is vital in supporting students to find appropriate accommodation. The promotion of these services is equally important to inform students of their availability and encourage them to seek help when needed.*

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# Objectives:

* Improve access to good quality accommodation services for students.
* To liaise with external organisations such as PRTB and Threshold to provide support to students experiencing difficulties with accommodation.
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**Actions:**

* Lobby to establish a point of contact within the PRTB and Threshold for officers to contact regarding students’ accommodation issues.
* Liaise with on campus accommodation services to continue the work in screening scams and alerting services to them.
* Co-ordinate an information campaign on tenant rights and responsibilities to complement the accommodation and finance guide.

**Suggested Action For Students’ Unions:**

* Where possible, co-ordinate local campaigns on campus level to

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# Research, Monitoring and Evaluation*It is vital for USI to review progress under the Accommodation Strategy on an annual basis. By providing basic annual progress reports on the action points outlined in the strategy, progress and effect can be tracked and with the provision of annual reviews, updates or changes can be suggested if deemed necessary.* Objectives:

* To monitor the impact of USI campaigns to inform students on their rights and responsibilities as tenants.
* To evaluate and review each campaign yearly and to update the strategy accordingly.
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**Actions:**

* Map progress of the strategy and produce a yearly progress update document.
* To review all campaigns and evaluate impact with support from external expert groups.
* Co-ordinate a survey to collect data on local accommodation issues for students’ unions on a local level.

**Suggested Action For Students’ Unions:**

* Where possible, review local campaigns on campus level to ensure messaging is effective, appropriate and relevant to students.

**Previous Mandates:**

* The President and relevant Vice Presidents to lobby the relevant authorities for more regulation in the rental market for students and also long term investment into the development of more purpose-built student accommodation.
* The President and VP Welfare to also lobby the relevant authorities for incentives towards landlords and homeowners who take in students.
* The relevant officers/officer board to advertise this scheme along with relevant accommodation campaigns and to provide support to member organisations in local campaigns around accommodation.
* The USI President to research best practice in relation to student housing associations and to consult with key stakeholders on the possibility of USI running an independent student housing association.
* The USI President to research vacant properties that may be available to create student accommodation and research funding avenues that USI may pursue in order to be in a financial position to create a student housing association.
* The President and the VP Welfare to work with appropriate bodies to lobby and campaign for some level of emergency rent control of the private sector and to report back to National Council in August.
* The Vice President for Welfare to investigate the possibility of arranging discounted temporary accommodation, that Member Organisations can refer students to.
* The VP Welfare to liaise with various organisations to promote Anti-bullying awareness, disclosure
training and any other relevant training to Student Residence staff to ensure that staff are trained
and able to deal with any issues that may arise for students living in affiliated Student residences.
* The Vice President for Welfare and Vice President for Equality and Citizenship to engage The Private Residency Tenancy Board to negotiate a specific channel for such emergency cases for International Students and/or students that will be emigrating.
* The VP / Welfare to formulate a policy document on the entitlements of students when their designated student villages go into receivership. This should involve offering support and advice to MOs if the situation arises and some points of information on the issue should be included in the USI Rent Book. The mandate shall lapse after three years from being passed at congress.
* To create an online nationwide student survey on student accommodation with the goal of finding out specific problems that students face, including cost, quality of accommodation and anti-social behaviour. This information could then be used in conjunction with the Deposit Retention Scheme Proposal and other accommodation campaigns in the future.
* The President to lobby the appropriate national bodies for large-scale scale investment in student accommodation.
* The President, VP Welfare and VP Equality & Citizenship to run a campaign promoting to landlords the benefits of having students as tenants.
* That the Vice-President for Welfare compiles a report on the various mechanisms for vetting rented accommodation in an effort to share best practice.
* That the Vice-President for Welfare includes as part of the Rent Book or separate guide, best practice on how to enforce tenants’ rights.
* Property Tax - The President and Welfare Officer to lobby the Minister for Education & Skills and the Minister for the Environment, Community & Local Government for the inclusion of student residences as an eligible exemption

**Reporting and Progress**
To ensure transparency, accountability and ongoing priority is placed on the provision of accommodation for students in Ireland clear and consistent communication on the progress of the implementation of the USI Accommodation Strategy and its initiatives is vital. The strategy’s progress will be documented in USI’s annual report, along with highlighting individual campus initiatives as they are launched throughout the year.

The strategic objectives for the provision of accommodation for 3rd level students between now and July 2019 are set out in this strategy and reflect the ambition and intent of the Union of Students in Ireland to deliver on its mandate for its members.

*In preparation, a range of significant / strategic risks facing the strategy’s implementation were identified.*

* Budgetary and Insufficient or inadequate budgets to meet campaign delivery costs.
* USI having to discontinue work and downsize campaigns/Officer resources
* Failure to achieve collaborations on the action points set in the strategy. For the strategy to be effective USI will need to foster support from external organisations and establish links with institutions and external stakeholders.
* Failure to ensure that the strategic and operational policies of the USI are properly developed and implemented, and that targets are met.

**Risk Mitigation:**

The Union of Students in Ireland will, over the life of this Strategic Plan, evaluate the above risks and will ensure that all actions and initiatives undertaken manage these challenges pro-actively, with actions being identified and implemented without delay, so that our mandate can be pursued and effectively delivered for our members.