

THINK BEFORE YOU PRINT
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VIEWING DIGITALLY

USI EQUALITY STRATEGY [3 YEARS]

ADOPTED AT USI CONGRESS 2016



Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

Equality Strategy

This strategy was passed at Congress 2016.

Forward

The naissance of the USI Equality Strategy was the result of the immediate aftermath of the Irish marriage equality campaign. The work of the Vice President (VP) Equality and Citizenship had been heavily focused on mobilising the student vote in the run-up to the referendum, meaning that other areas within the Equality and Citizenship brief did not develop at the same rate. In a further development to the equality remit, the HEA released The National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019¹ in early 2016. This plan lays out targets for increases in participation in higher level education form certain societal areas and demographs. As the VP Equality and Citizenship was part of the HEA Advisory Board for the National Access Plan, it is logical that the VP Equality and Citizenship engages with the implementation of the plan over the next three years, along with supporting SUs in their engagement with the plan.

The role of VP Equality and Citizenship was created in 2012, so in the eyes of the organisation, is still quite new. The brief is broad, and touches into a number of other USI officers' role, such as VP for Academic Affairs and Quality Assurance in relation to retention of students form certain socio-economic groups.

Following on from the resounding Yes vote in the marriage equality referendum on May 23rd 2015 (while also bearing in mind that USI members do not have marriage equality due residing in Northern

¹ "The vision behind [this] Plan is simply to ensure that the student body entering, participation in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population."
<http://www.heai.ie/en/policy/national-access-office/national-plans-equity-access-higher-education/2015-2019-access-plan>

Ireland) it is prudent that USI lays out a strategy for the work to be undertaken within the Equality and Citizenship brief over the next three years. Due to the nature of USI and operational procedures within the organisation such as mandates falling year on year, or new ones being added to the policy book, this strategy does not go into specific mandates in detail. Instead, it goes through key areas for the Equality and Citizenship brief, as laid out in the USI Constitution², and plots a strategic plan for how best USI and the VP Equality and Citizenship can deliver measurable results on behalf of the students who fall under the Equality and Citizenship brief.

The needs of students who fall under this brief can be diverse, along with being specific. It is vital that the VP Equality and Citizenship engaged with organisations and professionals who are trained within these areas.

Annie Hoey

USI VP Equality and Citizenship 2015/16

² USI Constitution, as of 22nd April 2015
<http://usi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/USI-Constitution-as-of-22nd-April-2015.pdf>

Vision

The USI Equality Strategy lays out a roadmap for the work of the VP Equality and Citizenship over the next three years. The strategy is not exhaustive, and additional responsibilities will be added to the Equality and Citizenship brief through Congress mandates and interim National Council policy. The strategy also goes through some key areas from the National Access Plan and maps out ways in which USI and students' union officers can take proactive steps in supporting the implementation of the plan.

The USI Equality Strategy aims to;

- Promote equity of access to higher education for all students.
- Support USI's principles and values of equality, inclusiveness, social justice, respect, dignity and care for the individual.

With the dual focus of equality and citizenship, the role itself can bear many different tasks and work. If the National Access Plan's target are met, there will be an increase in participation from students from various non-traditional higher level backgrounds. It will be vital for the VP Equality and Citizenship to maintain open dialogue with the HEA, so that knowledge can be obtained with regards to where the entrants of the next academic year will be coming from. It will be essential for the VP Equality and Citizenship to work with sabbatical officers to ascertain their needs in relation to supporting these incoming students.

Operating Environment- challenges and opportunities

USI has a membership of over 354,000³. Considering the size of the organisation and the resources that are available, meeting the needs of every member is challenging. However, the organisation is in

³ Total calculated USI HEA figures and DEL figures.

a good place to deliver on behalf of students who fall under the Equality and Citizenship brief, as over the past few of years USI has built up very positive working relationships with a number of organisations with the shared goal of supporting students within this brief. The VP Equality and Citizenship has a seat on the Board of Directors of organisations such as ICOS (Irish Council for International Students)⁴ and Ahead (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability)⁵. Being engaged at a national level allows for strong co-operation between the two organisations.

Objectives

The objective of the Equality Strategy is to lay out a roadmap for the work of the VP Equality and Citizenship over the next three years, along with the work additional USI officers may need to do in relation to the Equality and Citizenship brief. It is written in response to the launch of the Higher Education Authority 'National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019.' The main purpose of the National Access Plan is to increase participation in higher education from a number of target groups. The aim of the Equality Strategy is to lay out a plan for essential groundwork USI can do in order to support Students' Unions during the role-out of the National Access Plan, while also supporting other areas laid out in the USI Equality Policy.

The National Access Plan aims to bolster student participation within higher education from under-represented groups. In terms of feasible workload, outside of engaging with events such as College Awareness Week, there is not much scope for USI to heavily engage in the part of the Access Plan that aims to tackle underrepresentation at a pre-higher education level. However, USI is in a position to ensure these students are fully represented once they enter higher education, and

⁴ The Irish Council for International Students (ICOS) is an independent, national network promoting good policy and high standards in international education in Ireland. www.icosirl.ie

⁵ AHEAD, the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability is an independent non-profit organisation working to promote full access to and participation in further and higher education for students with disabilities and to enhance their employment prospects on graduation. www.ahead.ie

that the students' union officers of member organisations are fully trained in how best to support these students.

The strategy does not aim to be prescriptive; the nature of USI and our operational structures would not allow for a heavily directional strategy. Rather, it aims to highlight some key areas that the organisation needs to focus on, bearing in mind the HEA recently published National Access Plan.

Research

Due to the nature of the role of Equality and Citizenship, it is not possible for the officer to be fully knowledgeable of every area within the Equality and Citizenship brief. Therefore, it is crucial that the VP Equality and Citizenship undertakes adequate research before embarking on any project or campaign in relation to one of the Equality and Citizenship briefs. During the first year of this strategy, research in each area within the brief should be undertaken. This research should be qualitative in nature, including the use of focus groups and engagement with external organisations that work with students within each area. The VP Equality and Citizenship should also make use of quantitative data, using surveys to collect data to create a clear picture of the wants and needs of students in relation to the particular brief. Even though the Equality and Citizenship brief is divided into a number of areas, it is important to not singularly focus on each area as a stand-alone issue. In order to be fully representative, this research must be intersectional, and allow for those who fall under more than one area within the Equality and Citizenship brief. While this level of research may be time-consuming, it is vital so that USI as an organisation is able to deliver on the needs of its members.

Partnerships

The VP Equality and Citizenship should endeavour to work with external organisations so as to avail of their expertise in the areas pertaining to the Equality and Citizenship brief. The needs that fall under this remit can be diverse, so it is recommended that the VP Equality and Citizenship also makes full use of a broad and well-informed Advisory Panel to guide navigation through this strategy. USI recognises the need to work with others in the equality sector to further our aims and ambitions.

The VP Equality and Citizenship should:

- Develop new initiatives through collaborations with students' unions and external organisations.
- Establish a point of contact within partner organisations to support unions to further campaigns and policies.
- Liaise with activist groups to expand campaigns and resources.

Actions

This section is split into two parts: the first part relates directly to the National Access Plan and the measurable actions USI can take, and the second part relates to additional areas which fall under the Equality and Citizenship brief, as outlined in the USI Constitution. The actions outlined in these are not exhaustive, and are to compliment ongoing mandates and USI policy.

Part 1. Key areas of 'National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019'.

This section is a response to the targets laid out in the National Access Plan. It goes through some of the key areas highlighted in the plan, and lays down a roadmap of how best to ensure SU officers are best equipped to provide support, along with what support USI can provide for these students. A key part of the work will be to ensure the USI President to ensure that a workshop in relation to the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and DARE (Disability Access Route in Education) takes place annually during the summer months, as many students within the National Action Plan's target areas will likely be coming through one of these schemes.

1. Entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education.

Targets have been set to increase participation in higher education by those socio-economic groups that continue to be under-represented in the sector. In numerical terms, these targets will represent student numbers in those groups increasing by approximately 1,500 new entrants over the next five years. The basis for these targets is a comparison of higher education entrant and census data across different social groups. This confirms that some of those groups continue to be significantly under-represented in higher education compared to their numbers in the wider national population.⁶ European and Irish educational policies have set the objective that student bodies are to be more reflective of diversity within national populations.⁷

As part of ensuring that SU officers are best equipped to deal with these potential 1,500 new entrants from socio-economic groups with low participation in higher education, the USI VP Equality and Citizenship should prioritise the following actions:

⁶ *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019*, p. 43.

⁷ DES, *Higher Education System Performance Framework*, p. 5.

- VP AAQA and VP Welfare to ensure there is adequate training around SUSI, with specific mention of how best to support students dealing with issues surrounding independence, non-adjacent grants, special circumstances, etc.
- Lobby for the proposals in USI Grant Reform Paper to be implemented.
- VP Equality and Citizenship, VP AAQA and VP Welfare to develop an online guide to all available financial supports for students.

2. First time, mature student entrants

Mature students in Ireland are defined as those 23 years or over on 1 January of their year of entry to higher education. It has been HEA national access policy since 2005 to target support for those mature students who have not previously benefited from higher education and who enter college to complete a full-time course. In numerical terms, these target percentage figures represent an increase of approximately 3,500 mature student entrants (full and part-time/flexible) over the next five years.⁸

As part of ensuring that SU officers are best equipped to deal with these potential 3,500 new first time, mature student entrants, and that adequate supports are made available to these students from the national student body, the USI VP Equality and Citizenship should prioritise the following actions:

- Annual Mature Student Convention (MSC). Content of the MSC should be based on feedback from mature students and is reflective of the needs of those in attendance.
- Online forum for mature students, allowing for open debate and information sharing
- Summer training for mature student issues- either at SUT or SUT+. This training should cover financial supports, mental health and navigating SUSI as a mature student.

⁸ *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019*, p. 43.

- Support MOs in creating mature student officer role within the SU.
- VP Equality and Citizenship to develop links with Mature Student Ireland and Aontas.
- Structured engagement with mature students to ascertain what supports they want to see from their SU and USI (focus groups, etc.)

3. Students with disabilities.

The area of students with disabilities is vast, and covers many aspects from physical disability, invisible disabilities, and mental health difficulties. The National Access Plans targets those with physical, sensory and multiple disabilities. In numerical terms the percentage target represents an increase in the region of 1,200 in the number of undergraduate new entrants with disabilities over the next five years.⁹ When working with and for students with disabilities, it is important that one understands that their needs are multi-faceted and often complex, and may need quite a comprehensive approach. For this reason, it is important that SU officers are aware of these nuances and do not try to provide pastoral support without prior training or a knowledge of the supports available, both within their institution and outside it.

As part of ensuring that SU officers are best equipped to deal with these potential 1,200 new students with disabilities, and that adequate supports are made available to these students from the national student body, the USI VP Equality and Citizenship should prioritise the following actions:

- Disability support and awareness training at SUT or SUT+, with top-up training to be available throughout the year. This training should be done with a professional organisation, such as Ahead.

⁹ *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019*, p. 46.

- VP Equality and Citizenship to develop a guide which outlines how to ensure you SU is inclusive. This should include topics such as guidelines for accessible venues and events, poster and design guidelines for students with visual impairments, etc.
- Compile an audit of the accessibility of MO campuses.
- Structured engagement with students with disabilities to ascertain what supports they want to see from their SU and USI (focus groups, etc.)
- Lobby for the fund for students with disabilities and fund for part-time students with disabilities to be extended.
- Ensure that all USI events are held in locations that are accessible.

6. Irish Travellers

This is the first time that a national target has been set for increasing participation in higher education by people from the Irish Traveller Community. The need for such a target was identified in consultation with Traveller representative groups and with Travellers who have succeeded in accessing further and higher education in Ireland. Given the very small number of Traveller students accessing higher education each year (0.1% of entrants), a numerical rather than a percentage target is proposed.¹⁰

While the proposed target may only play a small proportion of students entering higher education over the next number of years, it is still important that SU officers are well-equipped to support these students. As part of ensuring that SU officers are best equipped to deal with these potential new Traveller students, and that adequate supports are made available to these students from the national student body, the USI VP Equality and Citizenship should prioritise the following actions:

- Lobby for implementation of USI mandate on Traveller ethnicity.

¹⁰ *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019*, p. 48.

- Work with Pavee Point and TravAct to ascertain what supports USI and SUs can offer to Traveller students.
- Structured engagement with Irish Traveller students to ascertain what supports they want to see from their SU and USI (focus groups, etc.)
- Support Sus in working with their Access Offices to showcase the supports available to those who self-identify as Travellers within their institution.

Part 2. Additional Areas that fall under the Equality and Citizenship brief, in accordance with the USI Constitution.

These areas are outlined within this strategy due to the fact they appear within the USI Constitution, under the Equality and Citizenship brief. The actions laid out within each section are in-keeping with USI ethos and are representative of the kind of work already being done in these areas.

1. Gender

The area of gender is wide, and crosses into many other areas. In line with USI ethos, gender is not considered binary, and due consideration is to be given to inclusion of a wide diversity of identities. When at all possible, USI should adopt a gender neutral stance, unless it is not in-keeping with the spirit of the event or action.

As part of addressing the need to tackle gender-specific issues within higher education, the USI VP Equality and Citizenship should endeavour to incorporate the following:

- Annual Women in Leadership training weekend. The content of the weekend should be based on feedback from SU officers, focus groups and previous participants.
- Develop a Women for Election training pack, to be available to all MOs in the run up to the SU elections. This training pack should be based on the research already available on why women do not put themselves forward for election, and best practise in tackling this. Support should also be sought from NUS-USI and NUS in terms of seeking advice from their own Women in Leadership campaigns.
- Support TENI in their work towards full gender recognition and trans equality, including lobbying for trans rights to be extended to those aged under 16.
- Unconscious bias training for SU officers during the summer months.
- Dignity and respect in the workplace training during the summer months.

- HR training for presidents in relation to harassment within the workplace.
- In keeping with long-standing USI policy, continue to develop the campaign to repeal the eighth amendment to the Irish Constitution.

2. Civil and Family status

Quite often the issue of civil and family status does not come under consideration when going about day to day work as student officers. However, there are many students who are married and/or have a family, and this can impact on their engagement with the student experience.

As part of addressing the need to tackle civil and family status issues within higher education, USI VP Equality and Citizenship should endeavour to incorporate the following:

- Support SUs in lobbying for Crèche facilities on campus.
- With VP Welfare develop a sample breastfeeding policy which can be adopted by any SU.
- With the VP Welfare and external organisations develop a sample Pregnancy Policy, and a sample Paternity Policy, which can be adopted by any SU.
- Lobby for change in SUSI guidelines for student parents living with their own parents.
- Lobby for change in SUSI guidelines from students who are estranged from their parents.
- Work with organisations who work for single fathers' rights and supports, and ensure that welfare officers are trained to support single fathers.

3. LGBTQ

Despite the success of marriage equality in the Republic of Ireland on May 23rd 2015, there still remains a large body of work to be done with students who identify as LGBTQ, not least the fact that students residing in Northern Ireland do not have access to full civil marriage equality.

As part of addressing the need to tackle LGBTQ issues within higher education, USI VP Equality and Citizenship should endeavour to incorporate the following:

- Continue lobby for Section 37 to be repealed.
- Develop a sample Gender Neutral Bathroom Policy, which can be adopted by any SU.
- Guide to inclusive language within a SU
- Work with relevant students to develop a campaign tackling homophobia on a faculty by faculty basis (e.g. engineering, etc).
- Work with TENI and BeLonG To on their campaign tackling homophobia and transphobia in sport.
- Pink Training.
- Support MOs in creating LGBTQ RO role within the SU.
- Work with NUS-USI on their campaign for access to civil marriage equality.
- Ensure sabbatical officers receive awareness training on all gender identities.

4. Race

As a movement, we have not heavily focused on race as an issue within our campaigns. Despite this, we know that race can be an issue for our members, and as such we need to endeavour to do more to support them.

As part of addressing the need to tackle race issues within higher education, USI VP Equality and Citizenship should endeavour to incorporate the following:

- Engage with the Immigrant and Migrant Council on their anti-racism campaign, including one on religious discrimination.
- Show racism the red card campaign in sport.
- Training for supporting migrant students over the summer months

- Lobby for migrant students and those in Direct Provision to have the same access (at a minimum) to dedicated supports as Erasmus, EU and non EEA (European Economic Area) students do.

5. International Students

There are more and more international students entering into higher education in Ireland. As a group their needs are as diverse as the wide selection of countries these students come from. USI and SU officers need to know how best to support these students, and ensure they are supported through their time in college here.

As part of addressing the need for supports for international students within higher education, USI VP Equality and Citizenship should endeavour to incorporate the following:

- ICOS training for SU officers over the summer months.
- Structured engagement with ICOS and international students to ascertain what supports they want to see from their SU and USI (focus groups, etc.)
- VP Equality and Citizenship to work with USI President, ICOS and international students to develop the International Student Charter.
- Lobby for the expansion for free fees to be extended to international students.

6. Religion

Ireland is moving towards being a multi-cultural, pluralist society. As such, the potential for religious discrimination is rife. USI and SU officers should take proactive steps to ensure this doesn't happen.

As part of addressing the risk for religious discrimination within higher education, USI VP Equality and Citizenship should endeavour to incorporate the following:

- Structured engagement with students who identify as religious to ascertain what supports they want to see from their SU and USI (focus groups, etc.)
- Work with external organisations, students' societies who have religious members, and relevant groups on anti-religious discrimination campaign.

Review of the Equality Strategy

There should be an annual review of the strategy, to be presented no later than the second National Council for the year. This review should assess progress of the strategy, along with taking into account the experience of local SU officers and the planned HEA targets for the following academic year. The review should also consider how action points can be refined or developed further, particularly in view of new or enhanced data that may become available over the course of the strategy.

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