

About USI

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 students in Further Education and Training, 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.

Strategy Overview

This strategy aims to provide a framework for good practice for growing USI's membership within Further and Education and Training, and for supporting and engaging that membership.

USI engagement with Further Education and Training

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) has long been at the forefront of fostering the role of the student voice in shaping and changing education in Ireland, supporting the work of local Students' Union's to expand and develop their capacity, and ensuring that their existence is recognised as crucial at both institutional and national level.

Access to education has been a key pillar of the efforts of the Union since its foundation, and with the student body growing increasingly diverse, ensuring a commitment to the ethos of lifelong learning continues to be a core principle. USI has worked collaboratively with the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU) on issues of progression and transition for a number of years now, and through our membership of the European Students' Union (ESU) have strengthened our ability to represent the interests of learners in matters such as the development of the National Framework of Qualifications, international recognition, standards, and in social inclusion.

However, this work has very often been Higher Education-centric, with little to no engagement from learners in Further Education and Training (FET). This has been a key challenge for USI for many years, with small progress made one year, rolled back the following year. FE engagement occurs through a number of Further Education College Students' Unions, who often faced challenges as a result of size, capacity and funding. With a lack of ongoing training, development and support, these Union's could rapidly go from proactive to inactive within a short period of time. In a busy environment, USI was rarely in a place to support their growth or stability.

These difficulties didn't take into account the vast numbers of learners in the sector, rather they were focused on the more recognisable Students' Union structures within Further

Education Colleges, and on learners in Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) programmes. In 2017 this represents around 35,000 students, in a wider sector of over 200,000 learners, from apprenticeships, to adult literacy and community education.

However, the reform of Further Education and Training in 2013 under the Education and Training Boards Act, underpinned by the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014 - 2019, connected and refocused the sector nationally. The abolition of the multitude of Vocational Education Committees and the advent of the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) supported by the ETBI, and centrally funded from SOLAS, represents an important opportunity to proactively re-engage students in FET.

The Student Voice

Supporting student engagement in non-compulsory education has become a key aspect of the student experience, institutional development, programme creation, and in quality enhancement. Once largely viewed as peripheral consumers of the knowledge on offer, learners are now increasingly discussed as the core constituent of education, with their active participation coveted in order to shape a collaborative and constructive teaching environment.

USI champions the notion of the student as a partner in their education, with the ability to influence meaningful enhancement, closing the feedback loop and ensuring the personal development of, not only their peers, but teachers too. Efforts in Higher Education have culminated recently with the National Student Engagement Programme, a partnership of USI, the HEA, and the QQI, working to train students in quality enhancement and analyse institutional capacity to involve them in academic governance. Meanwhile the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education ensures the ethos of student partnership is an active and evidenced principle of its work to change pedagogy in Ireland.

However, this ethos has taken many years to shape, and there is much still to do to ensure it is embedded in the culture of education. The work of Students' Unions over many decades has played a core part in these developments, and while the need for learner voice on decision-making bodies has long been recognised, in order to support this voice and to learn from it, more substantial efforts were and are still needed.

Creating critical mass and experience within the student body requires autonomous spaces to shape decision making, democratic processes and recognised governance structures. Furthermore, such structures require resource, without which, a sustained effort to involve learners cannot be developed and maintained. Recognised structures, led by successive generations of student representatives cannot grow the experiences of the collective body without funding, resource, and continued involvement in decision-making.

In this light, USI is committed to developing the student voice in FET and to supporting efforts to create space for autonomous decision-making. It is imperative that USI can grow its membership in FET and work to support their ability to represent the interests of students, both to their institutions and nationally.

Collaborations & Partnerships

USI acknowledges the importance of collaborations and partnerships to strengthen our work in Further Education and Training, and to ensuring that we our practices and efforts reflect the needs of students across that sector.

Objectives:

- To build support for the work that USI does in the area of student voice in Further Education and Training.
- To develop new initiatives through collaborations with Students' Unions and external organisations.

Actions:

- Seek support from external organisations to strengthen development work, training, and campaigns in the area of Further Education and Training.
- Collaborate and consult with Students' Unions, student groups, and external organisations to support and develop new campaigns, resources, research and training.
- Develop links with the Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), the Further Education and Training Authority (SOLAS), the National Adult Learning Organisation (AONTAS), and with other relevant organisations.

Our Further Education Members in NUS-USI

USI represents 374,000 students on the island of Ireland, but we must better promote that 140,000 of these students are based in Further Education Colleges in the North.

Representation of these students has been a key priority for NUS-USI, and the expertise that our members have developed in Northern Ireland should help to inform USI efforts to grow our FET membership in the South.

Objectives:

- To build stronger links with NUS-USI and to learn more from their work.
- To ensure better engagement with our Northern MOs in Further Education.
- To better promote the diversity of our membership in the North.

Actions:

- Create opportunities to learn from the practices of NUS-USI and FE College staff members in training, Union development, and FE student engagement.
- To engage with NUS-USI's FE Student Officer training event #FEfestival and to ensure USI takes every opportunity to meet with FE members in the North.
- To ensure campaigns and resources are relevant to the North, including FE students there, where possible, and that these resources are distributed through NUS-USI.
- Explore the feasibility of creating links between FET MOs in the South and FE MOs in the North.

Growing our FET Membership in the South

In order to develop an understanding of student issues in FET, to develop policy initiatives, and to campaign on these issues, USI must first address the significant lack of MOs based in FET.

Objectives:

- To engage with Students' Unions and student groups, including Student Councils, across FET on the possibility of USI membership.
- To grow USI's membership based in FET.

Actions:

- Reach out to Students' Unions and Student Councils in Further Education Colleges and build links with them.
- Support such Students' Unions to apply to become members of USI.
- Develop resources and guidance for Students' Unions to become USI members, including template Constitutions and Election Regulations.
- Support staff working in Further Education settings who wish to set up and foster effective Students' Unions in their colleges.
- Create a briefing note on the importance of supported and structured Students' Union, drawing upon this Strategy.

Training and Development

In order for USI to effectively support student representatives in Further Education and Training, and to maintain membership year-on-year, it is important that effective training is rolled out in FET.

Objectives:

- To ensure student representatives, including Student Officers, in FET are trained to effectively carry out their roles.
- To improve the capacity of Students' Unions in FET to represent their students.

Actions:

- Create training that is relevant to student representatives in FET; training that is adaptable and flexible to various roles and institutional settings, and that is well researched and evidence-based.
- Work with NUS-USI to identify best practice approaches in the North, and engage with NUS-USI's Further Education training for Student Officers.
- Develop and maintain links with the NUS UK Vice President Further Education and NUS UK staff members working with FE to help shape training strategies.
- Roll-out training opportunities that suit the needs of members, including sessions with student representatives in each MO and possible Regional trainings.

Engagement

USI MOs are well used to significant ongoing engagement from Officerboard, including supporting campaigns and initiatives, but also to identify the needs of each MO and to seek solutions. FET MOs will require significant engagement in order to support their efforts as representatives in their Colleges.

Objectives:

- Provide robust support to student representatives in FET so that they can effectively carry out their roles.
- Ensure strong links between USI and its membership in FET, and improve USI's capacity to work with these students.
- Ensure FET members feel part of the student movement, and are able to fully engage in it.

Actions:

- Arrange regular contact with MOs in FET, provide advice when necessary, and support their efforts to create positive change in their colleges.
- Create an engagement questionnaire that can be filled in during campus visits, so that USI Officerboard is equipped with an understanding of each College.
- Create resources for campuses to highlight USI membership and potential benefits.
- Adapt campaigns and materials for use in FET MOs throughout the year.
- Encourage networking and collaboration between Students' Unions in FET and HE in the same local areas, and help to facilitate this regionally.

USI Democracy

USI MOs based in FET must not only be supported on campus, but also, to be full members of the national student voice. It is important that student representatives from FET can feed into decision-making and governance, in order that USI can learn and benefit from their membership.

USI recognises that engagement with these structures requires local resource, and that this element of the Strategy will be particularly difficult to support, but must remain a priority.

Objectives:

- To ensure FET are involved in National Council, Congress, and other democratic structures of USI.
- To ensure that FET issues are put on the agenda at National Council, are discussed and actioned at Congress.
- To ensure that FET students and the issues they face are visible in USI's structures and campaigns.

Actions

- Work with FET MOs to increase resources available to them, in order to ensure they can travel to USI events and meetings.
- Work to build FET MO capacity to engage with USI democratic structures, and ensure that agendas include FET issues.

- Develop a Further Education Working Group that can be operationalised either at National Council physically, or remotely via videoconferencing.
- Explore the need for a conference for students from FET.
- Explore funding options to ensure that FET MOs can attend Congress.

Policy Development

Ultimately USI must be able to raise FET issues on a national level, in the same way that it currently does so effectively for Higher Education. Building membership and engaging with that membership in FET should result in real tangible change for those students.

Objectives:

- To ensure USI and the student movement are inclusive of all students in efforts to improve their education and experience.
- To ensure FET MOs and USI are equipped to create change locally and nationally for FET students.
- To ensure USI is recognised as the national voice for all students.

Actions:

- To utilise questionnaires, face-to-face meetings, and training sessions to identify key priorities for student representatives in FET.
- Embed motion writing and policy development in to training, so that FET MOs can shape change in their Colleges.
- USI Vice Presidents with policy remits to develop position papers and resources to lobby and campaign on FET student issues.
- Create opportunities to specifically engage apprentices and examine best practice internationally on how to involve them in decision-making.

- USI to organise opportunities for student representatives from FET MOs to lobby relevant organisations and politicians on the issues that matter to their students.

Conclusion

This Strategy represents an ambitious Plan of Work based on the need to grow our membership in the Further Education and Training sector in the South, and to more proactively promote and engage with our membership in the North.

The success of this Strategy rests on USI's ability to support FE Students' Unions to successfully apply to become USI members, to ensure structured engagement with them, and to maintain their membership long-term.

The actions listed in this Strategy are not exhaustive, nor are they immediately achievable. No timelines have been fixed to specific action points, allowing for USI Officerboard to roll-out the Strategy through the most appropriate means.