



# INTRODUCTION

A chara,

I am asking you for your support for my leadership of the student movement in Ireland in 2018-2019.

Students have been at the forefront of the fight for equal access, opportunities and supports for those who are marginalised, left behind or squeezed out of what is on offer because of their socio-economic status, their disability, or where they grew up. We will continue this fight, and reignite our movement around it.

We face a seminal moment in the shaping of the discussion around Higher Level education funding in Ireland, and it's on us to show leadership and ensure access is protected. Students must lead the consistent strive for better for not just now, but for the people coming after us. I have the background and the commitment to drive this.

Over the last few months, I have worked on the governmental oversight group and steering committee for the National LGBTI+ Youth Strategy, the National Women's Strategy committee, the High Level Group on International education., and numerous Higher Education policy level bodies focused on improving access, student retention, and increasing supports for marginalised groups.

I have significant experience in the Student Movement, with NGOs and with Government, and I will lead a strong, united union with purpose.

As VP for Welfare & Equality in Maynooth SU for two years, I also know first hand the day-to-day struggles of students and the barriers continuously placed in front of them. I have worked hard on case-by-case and policy level to challenge, to equalise and to change.

Your lived experience matters as a student, and I will carry that lived experience to the decision making tables and out onto the streets so that you are heard and change can happen.

It would be a privilege to work for and with you.

Let's face our challenges, together.

**Ar Scáth a Chéile a mhaireann na ndaoine.**

Síona Coghill



## Campaigns & Initiatives I have been involved in developing



# ACTION PLAN

## HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING: REIGNITING THE FIGHT

Every year for the last decade or more, USI has made the funding of Higher Level Education a priority, and yet it's been consistent firefighting. This issue is not a 12 month argument. We have to dig deep. We are at a pivotal moment in shaping the future of Higher Education in Ireland, and we need to reignite the urgency of this matter on the public agenda. The fight for sustainable, publicly funded higher education in this country cannot be lost, for the sake of the generations of students coming behind us, and no one else is going to lead this.

Fundamentally, education is not a commodity that can be bought and sold. We cannot afford to lose the battle of funding for higher education - it is the largest source of social good and social mobility in the country. The student-as-consumer model does not put the rights of the students at the centre of education, but treats education as a commercial entity from which students gain certain benefits.

I have the vision and determination to continue to steer the debate around education in students' favour and to bring other civil society groups with us - because we are all essentially fighting for the same thing - an accessible, quality education system is a cornerstone in building a more equal society in Ireland.



- Ensure USI are ready for every possible recommendation from the Oireachtas committee on Education and Skills, likely to come within the term of the new Officer Board team
- Oppose any form of income-contingent loans to ensure access to higher education for everyone, regardless of socio-economic background
- Fully utilise the collective power of SUs around the country to fight the commercialisation of education at all levels
- Mobilise students and other stakeholders in our fight for accessible education, and be prepared to take direct action if necessary
- Secure support from as many county councils as possible for publicly funded education
- Build on our strong social and economic argument for publicly funded education by investing in further, updated research beyond NERI
- Reignite the urgency of this fight, and utilise every creative resource available to the movement to make that happen, both on campuses across Ireland and at Oireachtas level



# AUTONOMY OF STUDENTS' UNIONS

'Autonomy' is something which very few within the student movement may see as an immediate issue, but is one which has the potential to shape and alter a students' union's ability to fully and effectively represent its membership of students. Essentially, the question of autonomy is about the fundamental right to self-govern and self-organise without any interference from those who have no such mandate by our students.

In 2017, USI Congress voted overwhelmingly to "defend the rights of students' unions to be autonomous, democratic, student led organisations", and that will be a priority if I am elected President.

Without operational autonomy for a students' union, our work as a movement will be severely impacted. The democratic nature of students' unions must be protected. SUs need to be free to make decisions and take actions on behalf of students without fear of budget cuts from the college or threats of funding cuts if they speak out on certain issues or run certain campaigns.



- 'Pursue a legislative requirement for the formal recognition, protection and above all else, the independence of higher education students' unions through the re-establishment of the Legislative working group of national council;
- Examine best practices for models of accountability and funding from Students' Unions nationally and internationally and brief all SUs;
- Outline existing Legislation on autonomy of Students' Unions internationally and pursue best practice

## COMMS & GRASSROOTS ENGAGEMENT

- The USI is one of the largest and most influential campaigning organisations in the country, but we have yet to reach our full potential when it comes to getting the work we do and what we achieve reaching the broad base of that membership. In order for us to truly be the mass lobbying machine that we are capable of being, this needs to be better, and much more interactive and responsive to drive and stimulate grassroots student engagement.
- USI often fails to engage the people who run our clubs and societies and volunteer in our Students' Unions. Our work across lobbying, organising and campaigning can be strengthened significantly by incentivising their engagement with the student movement nationally.
- In the face and wake of GDPR this May, USI and Member Organisations need a robust, union-wide response to the challenges presented by EU Data protection regulations.



- Pioneer practical spaces for Part-Time officers and grassroots student group activism to become a much more integral part of the work of USI, building on initiatives like the first ever USI Student Activist Think-In for Students for Choice
- Responding to the requirements of GDPR on Students' Unions, USI will drive solutions and develop arguments suitable for a local level to protect the work of SUs and the data needed to operate elections and other SU-Student communications
- Focus re-engagement with the student body across campuses through heavy promotion of mailing lists and access to direct student engagement during the roll out of our national campaigns
- Ensure visible USI presence on every campus including ready availability of pull-ups and info materials

# COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT

To ensure we continue to serve our members at all levels, we must increase and expand our income diversification with grants and commercial activity, to ensure not only the sustainability of our project work and campaigns, but to add further value for members of USI. We cannot rely on affiliate members fees entirely moving forward, and our aim should be to reduce the cost of national engagement with our events.



- Implement a USI strategic commercial development plan, optimising the training of staff in this area in order to increase our capacity for commercial opportunities and advertising
- Seek much more research-funding to drive the evidence-based work of our lobbying efforts nationally
- Continue to support and increase applications for grants and external funding to run specific projects and staffing roles within the organisation to complement and enrich the work of our policy Vice Presidents

# ACCOMMODATION

Student accommodation continues to be a national crisis, with all areas under significant pressure, and in particular colleges based in high-density urban centres. Students are still affected by poor quality accommodation, lack of access to accommodation, and ongoing infringements on basic contractual rights, with International and Erasmus students often worst affected.

Year after year, these continue to be issues. While USI has done significant work in raising the severe situation with Government, it is clear that the issue of accommodation cannot be seen as a Summer and early first semester issue. We need to meaningfully prioritise calls to tackle these issues all year round, with urgency.



- Insist on the immediate implementation of the National Student Housing Strategy
- Lobby for the student voice to remain at the centre of discussion on accommodation, and that private investors are not the only, or primary, stakeholders in what is now a public issue around suitable and affordable rental accommodation access
- Continue to expand the successful 'Rooms for Study' campaign throughout the country with the USI Student Housing Staff officer
- Lobby the Minister for Housing to develop a student housing trust similar to the Dutch Student Housing Cooperation
- Double our efforts to have accessible information for students through their students unions around their rights as tenants

# AN GHAELGE



- Prioritise supporting and integrating the new officer in their role
- Ensure USI works with all Cumann Gaelí to promote the use of an Ghaeilge on campuses across Ireland
- Continue to lobby the Government to restore grants for student teachers' attendance at mandatory Gaeltacht courses
- Campaign alongside NUS-USI and groups such as Dream Dearg in getting an Irish language act passed in Northern Ireland

# TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITIES

With the progress of the TU Bill through the Oireachtas, USI are still concerned with regard to the position and status of Students' Unions in the process. It will be USI's priority that the student focus and quality assurance of each educational institution cannot be allowed get cast aside in favour of political spin around Technological Universities across the country.



- Assist and support local unions throughout merger processes if necessary and develop further the network of TU and merger working groups to troubleshoot and share information
- Ensure that Unions can protect their ethos and what they do best in any mergers underway
- Ensure that mergers of institutions have quality and student needs at their heart and aren't just a cost-cutting exercise
- Work with local SUs to ensure adequate representation for students at all levels of the institution

# EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGES AND WORKERS RIGHTS

Our students and graduates are facing an unstable reality when it comes to the terms of employment that currently exist. We cannot ignore the exploitative nature of the all encompassing gig economy that offers them few rights or stability.

I believe it is crucial for USI to ensure its members are aware of their rights in the workplace. We cannot allow our students to continue to be devalued as they currently are with the culture of unpaid internships that only allow the privileged few to participate. We cannot and will not allow our members' most basic needs such as having a living wage, a standard working week and secure employment to be deemed as 'ambitious'.



- I will relentlessly ensure USI defends the rights of workers by campaigning for a living wage, an end to zero hour contracts and an end to precarious work. We will also lobby for better pay and standards for student interns in all sectors.  
Engage and organise working groups to prepare and arm our members with the essential information they need to be confident in uptaking working contracts and know what they are entitled to.  
Further highlight the benefit of SIPTU membership through USI and to run practical awareness raising campaigns for students on their rights in the workplace. This can include practical skills such as understanding tax procedures, benefits, how to interact with HR or how to use bargaining powers in early stages of contracts



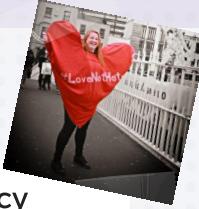
# REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

The campaign for reproductive rights in Ireland over the last 30 years has been led in no small part, by the student movement and USI. Whether or not the referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment passes on May 25th 2018, USI are committed to ensuring reproductive rights and access to healthcare for all students and wider society and we will continue to fight for it.

As Vice President for Equality & Citizenship, I've submitted and presented on a USI paper to the Citizens' Assembly, sat on the steering committee for the Repeal Coalition, developed the Students for Choice taskforce and network around the country, created the Students for Choice brand, developed training with Amnesty International, spoken and addressed numerous gatherings, protests, meetings and direct actions, and organised the first ever student activist think-in.



- Upon repeal of the Eighth Amendment, continue to lobby heavily for legislation on accessible access to reproductive healthcare, abortion services, and information in Ireland
- Work with NUS-USI to make reproductive healthcare accessible in Northern Ireland and to call for immediate decriminalisation



# SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM

Students have been unequivocally at the forefront of social as well as higher education policy change in Ireland and we will continue to be that force as change-makers. It is our duty and responsibility as one of the largest membership organisations in the country to ensure that the society we are part of is improved and injustices are addressed, for all.



- Build on our work this year as part of the National Housing & Homelessness Coalition, and keep this issue alive on the Government's agenda. The issue of homelessness also affects students around the country for a myriad of reasons and we cannot allow it to remain unaddressed
- USI should be a leading force in calling for meaningful environmental sustainability and in tackling climate change. This issue is genuinely one of the greatest threats to our future, and it is on our generation to make sure it remains a Government focus, as well as in supporting local student activism and efforts towards green campuses, divestment in fossil fuels, and plastic free environments
- Continue to highlight and speak out on LGBTI+ issues. As an appointed member of the National LGBTI+ Youth Strategy by Minister Katherine Zappone, I have worked hard to ensure third level students are supported when it comes to gender expression, identity, and sexuality
- Commit to continuing an expansive voter registration campaign. This year, I created the #GetRegd campaign for first semester which overall saw over 18,000 students registered to vote in a matter of weeks. I also developed the grant proposal with USI which secured us €25,000 funding for voter reg into Semester two.



Having been on USI Officer board for two years, I am already well-acquainted with the work of NUS-USI. I value the work USI and NUS-USI can do together, and want to further strengthen our working relationship over the next year.



- Work with NUS-USI and NUS UK to assess and reduce the impact of Brexit on Students
- Work with NUS-USI and student officers in Northern Ireland on furthering and fully supporting the campaign for civil marriage equality
- Ensure all USI training events are inclusive of student officers from Northern Ireland
- Ensure that materials produced are relevant to students in Northern Ireland
- Work closely with NUS-USI and NUS to oppose any further cuts to students services and education as part of the Trilateral Agreement

## ADDITIONAL



- **Postgraduates:** Support VP AA with developing the Postgraduate Symposium
- **External Review:** The organisation stands to improve itself with a comprehensive external review of how we operate and how we are governed

## RECENT ACHIEVEMENTS

- Ran inaugural Student Activist 'Think in' for #StudentsForChoice at Repeal HQ with over 60 student society and SU leaders (February 2018)
- Confirmed 25,000 funding for EU Citizenship Voter Registration Campaign (January 2018)
- Ran largest #WomenLead Project event to date (January 2018)
- Awarded a GALA for contribution to Student LGBT+ Advocacy Nationally (November 2017)
- Co-ordinated largest ever student contingent to the ARC March for Choice (September 2017)
- Lobbied for and secured additional funding to the SAF for the support of part-time students who are lone parents or members of the other access target groups (August 2017)
- Launched ESHTE [Ending Sexual Harassment at Third Level] with NWCI (April 2017)
- Appointed to the board of the Irish Family Planning Association (September 2017)
- Co-ordinated largest ever student gathering at Dublin Pride, under the theme 'Pride is Protest' and addressed the pre-rally (June 2017)
- Selected to presented with then USI President to the Citizens Assembly on the 8th Amendment after preparing submission (April 2017)
- Confirmed grant funding for a National Refugee Inclusion campaign (Feb 2017)
- Nominated to steering committee for the UNCRPD Ratification rights campaign by Joanne O'Riordan (Feb 2017)
- Nominated to the Dept. of Children & Youth Affairs National Oversight Committee for the LGBTI+ Youth Strategy (Feb 2017), assisted in the co-ordination of over 4,000 young people in consultations
- Nominated to the Dept. Justice & Equality National Women's Strategy Committee after submission (Feb 2017), remain nominated member of the Oversight Committee (2018)
- Nominated to the High Level Group for International Education (Jan 2017)
- Organised largest LGBT+ student event in Europe in UCC with UCCSU: 'Pink Training' (November 2016)

# EXPERIENCE & TRAINING

## MAYNOOTH STUDENTS UNION

- Two term Vice President for Welfare & Equality of Maynooth Students Union
- Member of Maynooth University Governing Authority & Academic Council 2014-2016
- Created and ran #Soulfest15, Maynooth SU's Mental Health & Wellbeing Week
- Created #NoLabelsNoLimits, award winning campaign raising awareness around (dis)ability
- Ran voter reg campaign ahead of Marriage Equality, registering over 4,000 students to vote in MU
- Introduced first Gender Neutral Bathrooms at Maynooth University
- Introduced first 'Lavender Graduations' for LGBTQ\* graduands of Maynooth University
- Former Vice-Chair of Maynooth Social Justice week



## NATIONAL LEVEL

- Deputy President, USI 2017-2018
- 2 term Vice President for Equality & Citizenship, USI 2016-2018
- Review Committee: **Student Assistance Fund**, HEA
- Review Committee: **Fund for Students with Disabilities**, HEA
- Steering Committee: **National Access Plan**, HEA
- Board of Directors: **The Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA)**
- Board of Directors: **International Students Association (ICOS)**
- Board of Directors: **Association for Higher Education Access for students with Disabilities (AHEAD)**
- **Chair of #StudentsForChoice Taskforce**, led largest student delegation in recent years at March for Choice
- Steering Group: **Ending Sexual Violence at Third Level (ESHTE)**, NWCI
- Steering Group: **Coalition to Repeal the 8th Amendment**
- Equality & Inclusion Support Network, National Youth Council of Ireland
- Awarded '**Equality Activist of the Year**', Student Achievement Awards Ireland (SAAI) 2015
- **Welfare Campaign of the Year** (MSU No Labels, No Limits - (dis)ability awareness), 2015
- Created the **#MakeGráTheLaw campaign** run by USI in 2015 for Marriage Equality
- USI Taskforce member, **Students for Marriage Equality**, 2014-15
- **Education Campaign of the Year** (May the Force be with MU), 2016 with MSU

- SmartConsent Trained
- Student Support Team Trained (Basic First Aid & Crowd Management)
- DRCC Handling Sexual Harassment in the Workplace - Certified
- Safetalk, ASIST, and Mental Health First Aid Certified
- Irish Wheelchair Association 'Disability Awareness Training' Certified





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