



Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

USI Equality Strategy 2019

Foreword

The Vice President for Equality and Citizenship was initially part of the HEA Advisory Board for the National Access Plan, prior to its implementation. It is imperative that the Vice President for Equality and Citizenship continues to work on the National Access Plan Steering Group throughout its implementation and continues to support students' unions with their engagement with students from the under-represented groups highlighted in the National Access Plan.

The brief of the Vice President for Equality and Citizenship is broad and spreads into the work of other members of the Officer Board and the work of the entire organisation. It is important that the Vice President for Equality and Citizenship ensures that the work of USI is 'equality proofed' and that all members of the team are aware of the contents of this strategy.

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 Constitution, and plots a strategic plan for how best USI and the Vice President for 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 Vice President for Equality and Citizenship engages with organisations and professionals who are trained within these areas.

Le meas,

Aisling Cusack



USI Vice President for Equality and Citizenship 2018/2019

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. The National Access Plan 2015 - 2019 set out to increase participation from students from various non-traditional higher level backgrounds.

The Progress Review of the National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education highlights the achievements of the Plan, in particular increased participation rates of students with disabilities and students from socio-economically disadvantaged groups. The Review identifies challenges remaining and priorities to 2021, including the need to improve participation rates among mature students and Irish Travellers and ensuring that the higher education system has processes in place to respond to students' needs as they start and progress through their studies.

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.

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 a written response to the launch of the Higher Education Authority 'Progress Review of the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education and Priorities to 2021.' 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 implementation 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 under-representation 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 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

keys areas that the organisation needs to focus on, bearing in mind the HEA are implementing a 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. This research should be qualitative and quantitative in nature, including the use of surveys, focus groups and engagement with external organisations that work with students within each area.

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 complement ongoing mandates and USI policy.

Part 1. National Access Plan

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 information in relation to the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and DARE (Disability Access Route in Education) and other access routes is disseminated to students' union officers 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.

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

VP AA 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.

- VP Equality and Citizenship, VP AA 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. Mature student participation has experienced a decline since the commencement of the implementation of the Plan. Participation has fallen from 13% to 9% for full-time students, and by 3% for full- and part-time students. However, the target still stands at 16% and it is hoped that PATH initiatives will balance out this decline.

As part of ensuring that SU officers are best equipped to deal with 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 event aimed at mature students. The content of this event 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. This training should cover financial supports, mental health and navigating SUSI as a mature student.
- 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 targets laid out in the National Access Plan 2015-2019 have already been exceeded in relation to participation rates of students with disabilities. As part of ensuring that SU officers are best equipped to deal with these 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.

- 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.
- Create an accessibility audit template for MOs and support them in auditing the accessibility of their campuses.
- Structured engagement with students with disabilities to ascertain what supports they want to see from their SU and USI (focus groups, etc.)
- Ensure that all USI events are held in locations that are accessible.

6. Irish Travellers

The number of Irish Travellers in higher education is still extremely low with only 41 in higher education in 2018. The National Access Plan laid out a target for 80 participants in higher education by 2019. 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. 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:

- Support Irish Traveller Ethnicity Day (March 1st).
- 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.

The Vice President for Equality and Citizenship should work to ensure USI are a representative in committees working on access to education. They should engage with the HEA and the Department of Education and Skills to identify any groups/committees working in the area of access to education or in relation to specific groups of students within the USI Constitution and this strategy.

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. As per the USI constitution the defense and promotion of all democratic and human rights are regarded as a core goal of the organisation. Therefore, USI should endeavour to show solidarity to those whose human rights are being violated, in keeping with the nine grounds of discrimination.

1. Gender

The area of gender is wide, and intersects with 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.
- 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 campaign for free, safe and local abortion access on the island of Ireland.

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. LGBTQI+

Despite the success of marriage equality in the Republic of Ireland on May 22nd 2015, there still remains a large body of work to be done with students who identify as LGBTQI+, 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:

- 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.
- Organise Pink Training annually.
- 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 campaigns, including one on religious discrimination.
- Show racism the red card campaign in sport.
- Training for supporting migrant students over the summer months
- Engaging students from ethnic minorities in campaigns.
- 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 (cultural awareness).

- 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 multicultural, 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.

Acknowledgements

The Union of Students in Ireland would like to thank the Students' Unions, Equality and Citizenship Working Group and external organisations who gave input and feedback for this strategy.