



Union of Students in Ireland

Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

Written submission to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, for the Public consultation on the National Sports Action Plan 2020 - 2022

About USI

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) is the sole representative body for students in Ireland and represents 374,000 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. The goal of USI is to work for the rights of students and a fair and equal third-level 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, and a member of Eurodoc, the European Council for Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers.

Introduction

USI aims to promote physical activity, healthy eating and positive body image and fight for access to health information, education and services for students. All third level institutions should be encouraged to adopt the concept of being a health promoting college. Colleges should actively address issues concerning healthy eating, drinking behaviour and the need to live an active lifestyle. This way, USI can ensure that young people in college are surrounded by a positive health culture while studying.

Proposed Action (Max 50 words)

USI welcomes this opportunity to write a submission on the National action plan, with a focus on third level students. There are many barriers that students are facing, that stop them from being physical activity while in third level. We would like to see this proposed action, of breaking these barriers, be tackled by the Department and included in the National Action Plan.

The main barriers are the following:

- The cost of third level gym facilities
- Long lecture hours hinders participation
- Lack of accreditation and initiatives for co-curricular activities

Business Case for Proposed Action

The cost of third level gym facilities

With the second highest fees in Europe and soaring accommodation costs, students in third level are under severe financial distress¹. The cost of gym in colleges is a barrier for students and USI would encourage all gym facilities to be free in all third level colleges, because at the moment there is inconsistency across all Higher Educational Institutions (HEI's)².

Long lecture hours: 'Keep Wednesday Afternoons Free'

Many students have long lecture hours that hinder students in engaging in co-curricular activities such as joining a sports clubs. The National Union of Students (NUS) and British Universities and college sport (BUCS), 'Keep Wednesday Afternoons Free' campaign has supported Students' Unions across the UK to lobby for dedicated time to be set aside in the academic timetable to allow students to participate in clubs, societies, volunteering and other co-curricular activity. This has been seen to be very successful in The University of Plymouth which has a timetabling policy whereby Wednesday Afternoons, from 1pm, are to be free (non-timetabled) to allow students to take part in extra-curricular activity³.

Participation in co-curricular activities, such as involvement with clubs has a positive impact on the student experience and wellbeing⁴. The current academic calendar doesn't have dedicated space to support such activities, which puts increasing strain on student experience and discourages students from getting involved and physically active.

¹ Second highest fees in Europe, article, Available at: <https://bit.ly/2KLz58r>

² Inconsistencies across gym facilities costs, article available at:
<https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/education/the-weekly-read-should-we-pay-for-college-gyms-30769381.html>

³ University of Plymouth, timetabling policy, available at: <https://bit.ly/2Mkk8NQ>

⁴ Craft. S.W, 'The Impact of Extracurricular Activities on Student Achievement at the High School Level' (2012)

USI encourage similar schemes to take place in Ireland, with a view to proposing a universal system for supporting co-curricular engagement in all HEI's.

Accreditation and initiatives for co-curricular activities

The importance of student participation in co-curricular activities such as Clubs, Societies, Students' Unions, volunteering and civic engagement during their time in college, and the benefits that engaging in such activity brings about in terms of the overall personal development of the student is crucial for the student experience. Institutions should provide credits to students for their involvement and participation in these activities, in order to facilitate, recognise and encourage physical activity. A system such as EDGE award has seen to be successful in Ulster University⁵.

USI are asking for a national approach to accreditation to student participation in sports and other co-curricular activities. There should be a wide range of both recreational sports and elite sport programmes available to students to participate in and receive credits for doing so.

Observations on the draft Sports Action Plan 2020 – 2022 (Max 250 words)

Action 2: Consistency in the design and delivery

The consistency in the design and delivery of physical activity interventions for children and young people is crucial for a sustainable and effective interventions. At the moment, there is a huge lack of consistency across third level colleges in relation to facilities, resources and the cost to college gyms⁶. USI welcome this action and would like to see particular consistency in Higher Education Institutions (HEI's).

Action 6: Sports for children and young

Encouragement of being involved in physical activity needs to begin from a young age in primary and secondary schools. There should be more local community events that are free, accessible to all and are family friendly.

Action 7: Expand coverage of the Get Ireland Walking, Cycling, Swimming and Running programmes

There needs to be more investment and improvement made to the current cycling infrastructure across the island of Ireland. At the moment many counties aren't safe for children and students to cycle to school or college⁷. Dublin cycling infrastructure has been criticised before and if the coverage of cycling is to expand, the infrastructure needs to be

⁵ Accreditation and initiatives for co-curricular activities example scheme, available at:
<https://www.ulster.ac.uk/business/employers/edge-award>

⁶ Inconsistencies across gym facilities costs, article available at:
<https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/education/the-weekly-read-should-we-pay-for-college-gyms-30769381.html>

⁷ Poor cycling infrastructure in Dublin, article available here:
<https://www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/ireland/wide-footpaths-bad-cycle-lanes-dublin-cycling-infrastructure-criticised-933610.html>

improved to support this. USI welcome this initiative to promote more sustainable and active forms of transport for students.

Action 28: Establishing an independent anti-doping agency

USI are currently lobbying for the decriminalising of drugs and would recommend that there is investment into treatment and health facilities along with education about drug use and risk for young adults and those of school age, while establishing for an independent anti-doping agency.

Conclusion

USI commends the Department of transport, tourism and sport for the introduction of the National Action Plan which aims to increase participation in sport to 50% of the population by 2027.

However, there are still many barriers for third level students to be physically active in college which need to be addressed before we will see an increase in participation from young people across the island of Ireland.

Key recommendations:

- Provide free gym facilities or reduce the cost significantly to provide free gym facilities to third level students on site
- Proposing a universal system for supporting co-curricular engagement by keeping Wednesday afternoons free
- USI are asking for a national approach to accreditation to student participation in sports and other co-curricular activities.

If you have any questions about this submission you can contact Róisín O'Donovan, Vice President for Welfare (welfare@usi.ie / 087 2809 703).

