



Union of Students in Ireland

Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

USI Placement and Work-Based Learning Strategy 2021-2024

About USI

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) is the sole representative body for third-level students in Ireland and represents 374,000 students in over thirty-member colleges across Ireland. Throughout its history, USI has worked relentlessly in the pursuit of student rights in all areas of the student experience.

Overview

This strategy aims to set the direction of USI's work on placement and work-based learning over the next three years. As the sole representative body for third-level students, USI recognizes that opportunities for experiential, hands-on learning can play a pivotal role in providing a high-quality educational experience for students. For many students, placement is not just an integral part of their education but plays a key role in equipping them with the skills and competencies required to practice in their chosen profession post-graduation.

However, there is often a lack of support for students – emotionally, academically and financially. This can range from lack of clear support on placement, financial barriers posed by unpaid, mandatory placements through to balancing academic workload alongside placement. As many courses with embedded work-based learning elements are also professionally accredited, students can sometimes encounter difficulties in meeting the professional requirements for the programme, particularly where placements have been heavily disrupted in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Summary of Strategy

This strategy is divided into six key areas:

1. Research on Placement and Work-Based Learning
2. Financial Support and Remuneration
3. Representation in the workplace
4. PSRB Engagement
5. Work-Based Learning and Assessment
6. Apprenticeship Representation

Existing Mandates

In carrying out this strategy, USI will be conscious of, and will continue to adhere to the following mandates:

- 20 AA (NC) 4 Student Nurses and Midwives Campaign
- AA 19 19 Student Teacher Campaign
- 20 NA (NC) 7 Unpaid Internships

The following mandates have been incorporated into the strategy and will therefore be deleted:

- 20 AA 12 Student Placement Campaign
- AA 19 10 Student Representation in Accreditation and PSRBs

Research on Placement and Work-Based Learning

Lead Officers: Vice President for Academic Affairs, Vice President for Campaigns, President.

Collaborators: Trade Unions, Quality and Qualifications Ireland

In order to effectively campaign on the issues affecting students on placement and work-based learning, it is important that USI develops an understanding of the breadth of programmes that incorporate placement. USI should undertake a piece of research on the use of placements, work-based learning, and industry-based programmes, working closely with Students' Unions, trade unions and other key stakeholders such as QQI in doing so.

This research should encompass, but not be limited to the following areas:

- The development of placements and work-based learning programmes, including the involvement of student representatives in this process.
- The supports that students receive in finding and completing placement, including but not limited to placement allocation, financial supports, pastoral support, institutional Careers and Placement Offices, academic support, and access to services.
- The impact of placements on financial supports such as SUSI grants.
- The impact of student vs employee status on placement.
- The structure of work-based learning opportunities, and the specific nature and prevalence of these placements by discipline or subject.
- The impact of COVID-19 on placement supply, and professional regulations.

This research should be completed by the end of the 2021/22 academic year.

Financial Support and Remuneration

Lead Officers: Vice President for Campaigns, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Vice President for Welfare, President.

Collaborators: Trade Unions.

Whilst placement can be a very positive experience for many, it can also serve as a further financial barrier limiting student progression and achievement. Not only are students unpaid in many placements, but they also often face numerous additional costs such as training and certification, travel, accommodation and subsistence. Whilst in some cases this is covered by placement employers, this is not the case across the board.

In the case of student nurses and midwives, students hold 'supernumerary' status whilst on placement, meaning that they are counted in addition to the workforce and are therefore considered as being there primarily to learn. Whilst this is an important recognition of the need to protect the learning of student nurses & midwives, it also means that they cannot be paid and there is limited financial support available to them. Furthermore, inadequate staffing levels within the HSE often inhibit learning opportunities for students, further exacerbating pressure on student nurses & midwives.

Having undertaken research to further investigate the financial supports in place for students across numerous fields, USI will:

- Continue to lobby for the provision of fair and substantial financial supports for students undertaking placement, recognizing the nuances of specific professions.
- Work with trade union bodies and other organisations to fight for the betterment of financial, and additional rights afforded to students whilst on placement.

Representation in the Workplace

Lead Officers: Vice President for Campaigns, President.

Collaborators: Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Trade Unions.

Some students hold status as employees whilst on placement or stand to become registered professionals upon graduation. Many trade unions offer student membership to students in relevant professions, and work to represent their interests and advance their rights in the workplace.

It is incredibly important that the trade union and students' union movements work cohesively to ensure the protection and upholding of students' rights throughout their education – be that on campus or in a practice-based workplace setting. Closer collaboration between USI and its' members, and relevant trade unions will help to develop clearer pathways of communication and enhanced representation for students on placement, and in professional accredited courses.

USI will:

- Work closely with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) to develop enhanced collaboration and shared responsibility with relevant trade unions.
- Map out the respective roles of trade unions and students' unions in representing the interests of students on placement, and in professionally accredited courses.

PSRB Engagement

Lead Officer: Vice President for Academic Affairs

Collaborators: QQI, PSRBs.

Professional, regulatory and statutory bodies play a key role in the education of 1000s of students who undertake professionally accredited courses. These organisations, many of whom are recognized in legislation as the statutory body responsible for the profession, are responsible for ensuring that individuals meet the skills and competencies required to practice in their chosen profession. In carrying out their duties, they work closely with educational providers to validate and review programmes, ensuring that they meet their professional requirements and allow students to gain the standards of proficiency for the profession.

However, in some cases, professionally accredited courses can prove very tightly regulated, with strict methods of assessment, very stringent practical placement requirements and limited flexibility for students. This can result in a very challenging educational experience for students – something which was highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic where

professional regulations played a key role in the assessment completed by students and limited the mitigations that could be offered to some students.

Lines of communication are also not always clear with students not being sure of whether the responsibility for certain elements of the course rest with their institution, or the professional body. Student representation is not currently prioritised by many PSRBs resulting in limited engagement between these organisations and the students in whose education they play a vital role.

In tackling this issue, USI will:

- Build upon existing structures of engagement between QQI and the PSRBs to encourage greater inclusion of student representatives in professional accreditation processes.
- Support local SUs in developing relationships with relevant Schools/Departments within their institutions.
- Work with QQI to encourage PSRBs to develop dedicated channels of engagement and communication for students.
- Work with QQI to ensure that student representation is recognised and enhanced in quality assurance processes that involve PSRBs.

Work-based Learning and Assessment

Lead Officer: Vice President for Academic Affairs

Collaborators: Quality and Qualifications Ireland, National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, PSRBs.

Work-based learning and assessment plays an integral role in the education of many students – but as with all courses, it's important that we review learning and assessment on a regular basis as part of a robust cyclical quality assurance process.

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning and QQI have begun to collaboratively support enhancement of work-based assessment through several sector-wide events. USI, and local students' unions have participated in some of these events but there is space to further increase the role that students and student representatives play in this enhancement work. QQI will also be follow up on their previously released Green Paper on Assessment in years to come, which USI responded to at the time and it's vital that students drive this work forward.

USI will:

- Work with the National Forum and QQI to ensure that students play a central role in enhancement work locally and nationally on work-based learning and assessment.

Apprenticeship Representation

Lead Officers: Vice President for Academic Affairs, President

Collaborators: QQI, SOLAS, ICTU, National Society of Apprentices.

Work-based learning is an integral element of apprenticeship education. Apprentices predominantly learn through on-site learning with their employers, which is supplemented by an educational element which can be delivered either on or off site by an education provider. This model means that most apprentices spend most of their education with their employer and will have a very different relationship with their educational provider. COVID-19 has also had a detrimental impact on the delivery of apprenticeships given their practical nature and every effort must be made to ensure they can be delivered in a safe manner that allows apprentices to progress in their education.

The Department of Further & Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science will launch a new Apprenticeship Action Plan in 2021 which will set out the strategic direction of apprenticeship education for years to come. USI provided a submission to the consultation for this action plan in September 2020, which set out several key areas in which USI would like to see work being expanded, particularly in terms of the diversity of apprenticeships and of learners engaging in apprenticeships; the role that the apprentice voice plays in the governance and management of apprenticeships and the provision of financial support for apprentices. The submission can be found [here](#).

Whilst USI will make every effort to ensure that apprentices are considered as part of the entirety of this strategy, the specific nature of apprenticeships must be taken into account and therefore USI will undertake the following actions:

- Continue to engage with the European Apprenticeship Network to deepen USI's understanding of, and engagement with apprenticeship issues on a local, national and European level.
- Continue to work with the National Society of Apprentices to support and build capacity amongst local students' unions to represent the interests of apprentices on their campus.
- Work closely with ICTU, and the trade union movement to advance the role and voice of apprentices in the new Apprenticeship Action Plan.
- Develop a stronger working relationship with SOLAS and other key stakeholders in the Apprenticeship sector to ensure the apprentice voice is supported in the quality assurance and governance of apprenticeship provision going forward, and in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Conclusion

This document sets out the future direction of USI's work in the area of placement and work-based-learning. It must be acknowledged that the scope of some of this work will be determined by other factors such as the period of which COVID-19 impacts the delivery and provision of third level education. As such, USI may implement additional actions as is deemed appropriate in order to advance the educational interests of those engaged in work-based learning, placement and industry-based education.