Postgraduate Student Engagement in Decision-Making:

Fostering Connected Learning Communities

2021

National Student Engagement Programme

Clár Rannpháirtíochta Náisiúnta na Mac Léinn

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Naomi Algeo

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AN tÚDARÁS um ARD-OIDEACHAS

QQI
Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

USI
Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

www.studentengagement.ie   NStEP@USI.ie   National Student Engagement Programme

NStEPie   National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP)

About the Author

Naomi Algeo is an Irish Research Council PhD Scholar (2018-2021) based at the School of Medicine, Trinity College Dublin. Her doctorate explores the development and feasibility of a self-management intervention to support return to employment for women with breast cancer. An Occupational Therapist by background, Naomi has also held scholarships from the National Institute of Health Research, and Arthritis Research UK. Naomi has both national and international experience of student representative roles. She has been elected as class representative and programme representative at NUI Galway and City, University of London, respectively.

In 2017, Naomi was awarded the Programme Representative Award by City, University of London. She sits as a Quality Assurance Learner Expert for Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) panels and has also worked for the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland as a Learner Expert for institutional reviews.

Naomi joined the NStEP team as a Student Associate for a period of 6 months during the 2020/2021 academic year, leading on the Postgraduate Student Engagement project. Naomi is also an NStEP Project Team Member currently working to co-create a revised Framework for Student Engagement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Postgraduate student engagement in decision-making

Introduction

This report, published by the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP), is the result of a collaborative consultation with postgraduates, higher education institutions, students' unions, higher education bodies, and other stakeholders across Ireland. NStEP would like to thank all those who worked with us to inform this report.

Why have we produced this report?

It is the aim of NStEP to inform, guide and support an Irish higher education landscape that fosters student engagement in decision-making and the building of meaningful staff-student partnerships within and beyond institutions (NStEP Strategy, 2019-2021). While there has traditionally been focus on undergraduate student engagement, there is a need to explore student engagement processes among postgraduate cohorts. In August 2020, a postgraduate student engagement project was established under NStEP, with the broad objective to explore the development of postgraduate student engagement in Ireland. At the outset, a student associate intern was recruited to lead the project. A review of the literature relating to postgraduate student engagement was completed before defining the aims of the project. NStEP also undertook to explore current national priorities and projects in the postgraduate space. Ultimately, this project aims to examine what is effective and meaningful postgraduate student engagement in decision-making, how developed is it in Irish higher education currently, and what are the challenges and enablers to consider when seeking to enhance a more authentic culture of it for students and staff?

Who is this report for?

This report is for all involved in postgraduate higher education; postgraduate taught and research students, institutional staff (academics, professional services, quality assurance, senior management, etc), students' unions, and those working at a national level.

What evidence did we use to inform this report?

NStEP hosted fifteen discussion forums across the sector from December 2020 to February 2021, with representation from seventeen institutions including six universities, two technological universities, six institutes of technology, and three private institutions. In addition to this, fourteen one-to-one or small group consultations were facilitated. In total, 53 postgraduate taught and research students and 28 HEI staff were consulted. A document review of literature related to postgraduate student engagement both nationally and internationally was also completed. For a selection of these documents, please refer to the Bibliography (Page 30).

What do we mean by 'student engagement in decision-making'?

NStEP supports the development of a culture of meaningful student engagement in decision-making, underpinned by 'students as partners' approaches. This work is facilitated across four domains of student engagement within higher education. These are (1) governance and management, (2) teaching and learning, (3) quality assurance and enhancement, and (4) student representation and organisation. Understanding how to develop a connected learning community of engaged partnership is best achieved through inter-connected strategies across these four domains, where students and staff are supported to collaborate and co-create, empowered to influence change and enhancement across the educational and institutional experience. This work builds on the conclusions of *Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision-Making* (HEA, 2016) that sets out a concept of students as partners in juxtaposition to approaches that treat students as consumers.

Definitions and understandings of student engagement vary, with these variations often informed by the roles, challenges, and priorities of achieving engagement in different parts of the higher education community. Seeking to address these varied views and building upon work to improve student engagement across decision-making, NStEP published a discussion paper in 2020 that sets out the interlinked and distinct concepts of *student voice, student engagement,* and *student partnership.*

The relationship between these intertwined concepts is set out as follows:

'Considered together, with varied opportunities for both students and staff, **student engagement** is the process through which the **student voice** is heard, understood, and amplified, while **student partnership** builds a sense of collaboration that can redefine traditional hierarchies in higher education for the benefit of all. This process of student engagement requires commonly understood approaches.'

For the purposes of this report, we consider the ways in which postgraduate students are included in these processes and approaches of engagement and partnership. We hope that this report is complementary to wider efforts to enhance student engagement, offering perspectives and practical suggestions for areas of focus.
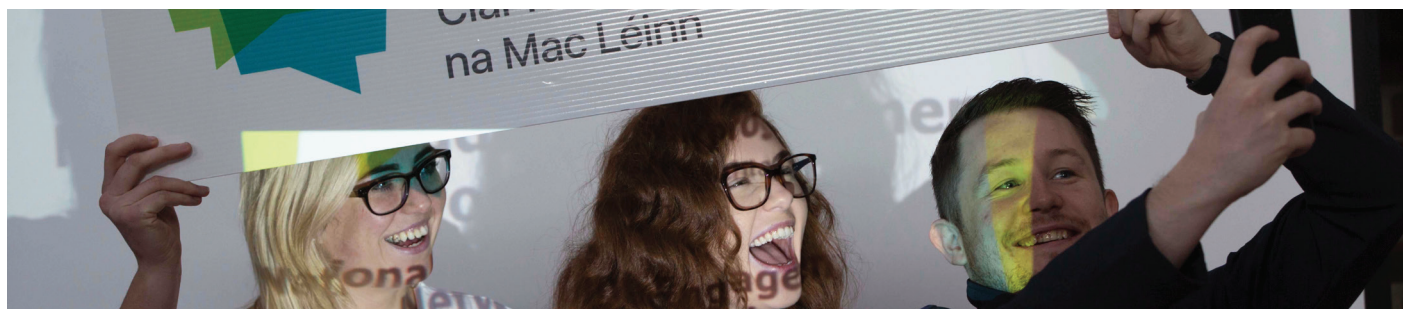
Postgraduate student engagement in Ireland: An overview

In the 2018-19 academic year, there were 32,710 postgraduate students enrolled in study in Ireland (HEA, 2020). Of these, 22,645 were engaged in a Taught Master's, 8,643 in a Doctoral Programme, and 1,422 in a Masters by Research. In addition to these numbers, 7,486 were enrolled in Postgraduate Certificates, Diplomas or Occasionals.

Postgraduate student experiences in higher education can differ to undergraduate experiences in many ways and can be influenced by factors including (but not limited to) age, life demands, motivations for third-level education, and whether the degree is being completed part- or full-time. Postgraduate students are typically older than undergraduates (HEA, 2020). In Ireland, 78% of postgraduates (postgraduate taught and postgraduate research) are greater than 23 years old. When observing postgraduate research students in isolation, this climbs to 92% > 23 years old. With age, comes varying life demands which can also impact on the ability and motivation to engage in student engagement activities and decision-making processes.

	Undergraduates	Postgraduate Taught	Postgraduate Research
Mean Age	26	32	34
Median Age	23	29	31
% > 23 years old	14%	72%	92%

Table 1: HEA Demographic Statistics 2018/19

It is widely accepted that postgraduate student engagement in decision-making is less developed or consistent when compared to undergraduate counterparts in Ireland. Indeed, this is reflected in the 'sparsity' of students as partners exploration between staff and postgraduate research students, in particular (Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2018). Much of the international literature that includes postgraduate students in explorations of engagement and partnership cultures examine specific projects that do not take a whole-of-institution approach or are restricted to considerations of engagement in learning and/or research. Indeed, a number of key frameworks for student engagement or partnership do not specifically refer to postgraduates, though they do note the importance of inclusivity and recognising diversity (TSEP, 2019; sparqs, 2015; HEA, 2016; NStEP, 2020). The paucity of detailed considerations internationally, as well as to date in Ireland, does provide a meaningful opportunity to begin to explore how we might best approach enhancement of postgraduate engagement in decision-making nationally and institutionally.

There were varying perceptions as to what 'student engagement' was during discussions with staff and students across the sector. The concept was often interpreted by postgraduate students and staff as a general engagement/contact with both staff and students. The exception to this was when attendees were already engaged in or aware of NStEP initiatives or their respective students' union. While plenty of good practice exists across Ireland, postgraduate student engagement is typically fragmented. The level and quality of student engagement can differ from programme to programme, institution to institution, where governance and management structures can vary widely. It was described by stakeholders as "a mixed bag", "inconsistent", and sometimes "tokenistic". Variations also exist between postgraduate taught and research cohorts, who can experience distinct challenges to one another. StudentSurvey.ie focuses on students' engagement with their learning and learning environment, so does not specifically explore students' involvement in institutional decision-making. However, the separate surveys that are issued to postgraduate taught cohorts (along with undergraduate cohorts), and postgraduate researchers, provides a crucial evidence-base to support the emergence of student-staff partnerships to inform and support such decision-making cultures.

During the consultation and development phase for the current NStEP Strategy, students and staff across the sector identified the need for inclusive approaches to student engagement, with a particular emphasis on postgraduate cohorts. When developing this project, NStEP consulted with partners nationally and internationally on work currently underway in the postgraduate education space in order to understand the ways in which our work might effectively contribute to national and institutional discourse. While much work is underway to strengthen and expand postgraduate education in Ireland, systematic and widespread approaches to the role of postgraduate students in decision-making have not been explored. Our counterparts in Scotland, sparqs, have done considerable work over the past number of years to strengthen formal and informal structures for postgraduate student engagement in institutional governance and quality. A key question for sparqs has been the development of resources specific to postgraduate research students.

A core aim of this NStEP project was to begin to encourage national discourse in Irish higher education and to develop new resources, similar to the work of sparqs. This discourse is complementary to work of national partners, such as the development of a strategy for representation in postgraduate affairs in the Union of Students in Ireland (USI, 2018), the National Framework for Doctoral Education (HEA and QQI, 2017) and in particular, Ireland's Framework of Good Practice Research Degree Programmes which specifically refers to institutional consideration of the principles of student engagement upon which NStEP was founded (QQI, 2019). The thematic areas for consideration detailed in this report are not supposed to be a comprehensive analysis of all of the challenges of postgraduate student engagement in Irish higher education, though they are intended to be an effective starting point for dialogue and exploration.

Discussion Forums

As part of the consultation process, NStEP invited postgraduate students, staff who engage with postgraduates, students' union officers, and those working in higher education bodies across Ireland to share their experiences through a series of online discussion forums. Four major themes emerged from this consultation:

BUILDING COMMUNITY

Nurturing connection from the outset of a postgraduate programme

ENCOURAGING INVOLVEMENT

Barriers and enablers to postgraduates seeking student engagement opportunities

THE FEEDBACK LOOP

Collecting, addressing and closing the feedback loop

MOVING FORWARD

Empowering postgraduates and staff to enhance student engagement

A note on taught versus research experiences

For the purposes of this work, from the outset, it was decided to explore experiences of both taught and research students, as well as staff who work with both broader cohorts. The broad themes of this report reflect challenges of postgraduate student engagement generally. Where taught or research cohorts are considered separately it is indicated.

BUILDING COMMUNITY: NURTURING CONNECTION FROM THE OUTSET OF A POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMME

The need for connection with, or community within, an institution from the outset of a postgraduate programme, was noted as both an enabler and barrier in some postgraduate student engagement processes. A key theme that emerged from consultations was that postgraduates often prioritised building their network first within the institution before engaging in decision-making processes. For other postgraduates, participation in decision-making processes were seen as an opportunity to build contacts and develop a sense of belonging with the institution. This network was often already established if the postgraduate had transitioned directly from an undergraduate programme within the same institution and knew the 'lay of the land'.

"If you're completely brand new to the institution, it's difficult to focus on anything other than your work and building friendships" (Postgraduate Research, Institute of Technology).

"I'm based in a small separate building away from the main campus, so I do feel very detached from the university. When I started my PhD, I was getting to grips with trying to induct myself into the basic everyday things. Student engagement processes weren't at the forefront of my thinking at the time." (Postgraduate Research, University).

Lack of connection or a sense of community can lead to isolation, therefore structures that help postgraduates feel supported and connected to others may have an indirect benefit of encouraging greater involvement in student engagement activities. This reflects recent research in Ireland (O'Regan, 2020) which recommends promoting a sense of community both within departments and across academic institutions for postgraduate researchers in general. A recent survey by the Royal Irish Academy (2020) highlights that, in light of the impact of the pandemic, there are less opportunities to build collaborations and network for early-stage career researchers. This can present both within and across institutions. The issue of isolation was discussed at length by postgraduate research students who often described themselves as 'working in silos' and 'on a lonely road'. This can impact on their perceived ability to represent or reflect the experiences of postgraduate research cohorts effectively if they were to seek to engage in decision-making opportunities.

"You feel like you're the only one [with an issue]. [The issues] are so specific to you" (Postgraduate Research, Institute of Technology).

"I would never stand up to represent other students as I don't have that sense of belonging or connection [with them]. I'm not on campus." (Postgraduate Research, Institute of Technology)

This sense of isolation can differ across departments or faculties. For example, postgraduate researchers who were lab-based and working as part of a larger team were less likely to indicate isolation than other postgraduate research cohorts. While postgraduate research students have long endured experiences of isolation, the pandemic has presented new challenges for postgraduate taught students where isolation has been more widely observed due to the rapid move to online learning. While online learning has enabled some to engage in higher education who might not have had the opportunity or flexibility to do so before, the removal of face-to-face components have had an impact on social engagement, especially considering that postgraduate taught students may be less likely to get involved in extracurricular activity due to the more transient nature of their motivations for study. A significant theme of discussions with postgraduate taught students reflected the current difficulties of lack of social interaction both inside and outside of the virtual classroom environment.

"I would just find it too difficult to represent a class who I've never met. I've never met my class in real life. That's no fault of the institution but it does present a barrier in terms of my thought process in getting involved
[in student engagement processes]"
(Postgraduate Taught, Technological University)

Several potential solutions to overcome this sense of isolation for postgraduate taught students were suggested during the course of consultation, and indeed current practices in online provision exist in Ireland that should be more widely embedded for postgraduates. The need to enhance social interaction and build communities within cohorts and departments, not just as a result of the pandemic, was seen as crucial to creating an environment that could support more engagement with representation and engagement activities. This is particularly valuable for ensuring that postgraduate cohorts develop a sense of belonging to the wider institution.

Postgraduate Student Engagement - Case Study 1
Developing a Postgraduate Research Society in Limerick Institute of Technology

LIT
LIMERICK INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

The Challenge: While postgraduate researchers can often encounter *"a lonely road"* during their research journey, this was exacerbated by Covid-19 restrictions.

The Solution: The **Postgraduate Research Society** was founded by a small group of LIT postgraduate researchers in 2020, in response to shifts in engagement opportunities due to the pandemic.

Aims and Objectives:
1. To facilitate opportunities for postgraduate research students to engage with one another e.g., upcoming virtual 'Tea and Chats'.
2. To develop a Peer Mentorship Programme and training for postgraduate researchers.
3. To host workshops for postgraduate researchers on core topics of interest e.g., academic writing, managing mental health, etc.

The Structure: Seven committee members with roles including (i) Secretary, (ii) Development Co-Director, (iii) Engagement Co-Director, (iv) Mentorship Lead, (v) Ordinary Committee Members.
While the group is a Society, they fall under the Graduate Research Office (GRO) and have close links with the Dean of Research.

Key Enablers:
* 'Buy-In'/Support from the Dean of Research who acts as a champion for the Society.
* Founder of the Society was previously heavily involved in SU activity within LIT and knew 'the lay of the land'.
* As a society, the group can access funding for events etc.

Learning to date:
* Not to be discouraged by fluctuations in attendance numbers. It can take time to establish the group and create a community.
* Catchment of postgraduate researchers is widespread as campuses based across Limerick, Tipperary and Clare. Online meetings can aid with this issue.

Postgraduate Student Engagement
- Case Study 2
USI Postgraduate Working Group - A nationally-led forum for postgrads
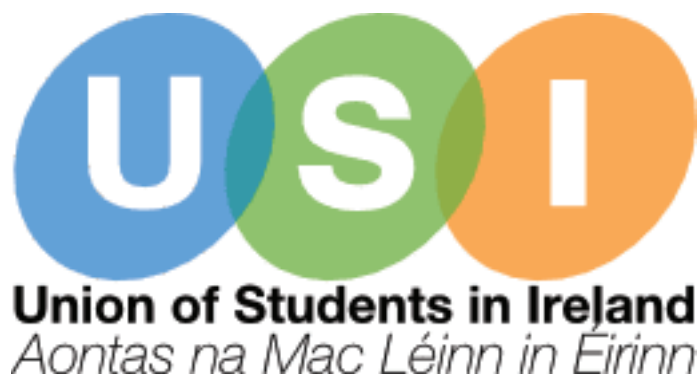
The Challenge: While there were some networking opportunities for postgraduates within institutions across Ireland, there was a gap in student engagement opportunities across institutions.

The Solution: The **USI Postgraduate Working Group** was established in 2017/18 to create a platform for postgraduates across institutions in Ireland to connect with one another

The Structure: Every postgraduate in Ireland is eligible to join the Working Group. This is typically via the local Students' Union where an expression of interest can be made. Alternatively, a postgraduate can contact the Vice President of Postgraduate Affairs (VPPGA) at postgrad@usi.ie. Meetings are held approximately every 6-8 weeks.

Aims and Objectives:
- To facilitate a platform for postgraduates across Ireland to seek advice from their peers on local issues, share practice nationwide, and discuss unique postgraduate learning experiences.
- To inform national campaigns, for example, on postgraduate-specific issues, welfare, etc.

Learning to date:
- There is a need to devote considerable time during meetings for local issues. This enables postgraduates to share any local challenges and provide a platform for postgraduates from other institutions to impart advice/guidance based on previous experience.
- While there is a good postgraduate membership of the working group, there is a need to broaden awareness of the group. The more postgraduates that feed into the working group, the greater potential success in rolling out national campaigns, and supporting local issues.
- Similar structures at an institutional level can contribute to wider collaboration and the development of shared understanding of issues, which in turn, would support the continued evolution of national approaches.

Induction

Induction to an institution was cited as a useful exercise by most postgraduates and as an important opportunity to highlight student engagement processes. However, induction experiences were inconsistent. The importance of formal induction processes has previously been underlined as a component for structured PhD programmes, for example, in the National Strategy for Higher Education 2030 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). Where induction structures are in place, the opportunity to highlight the value of student engagement in decision-making varies. During the consultation, when exploring the possibility of encouraging student engagement during induction processes, experiences differed significantly. Due to various pressures, including information on student engagement in decision-making was viewed as a 'battle' for some, while for others it was viewed as a key component of induction (See Case Study 5).

Prior to Covid-19, induction was typically delivered in a face-to-face format, but more recently delivered virtually. A Quick Guide for Induction and Orientation was issued by NStEP to support student engagement during the pandemic (NStEP, 2020) and may be a helpful resource to consider in a postgraduate context. Moving forward, institutions may be considering a blend of face-to-face and digital formats to facilitate those unable to attend in person, which could provide greater opportunity to encourage involvement in engagement in decision-making activities from the outset. This is particularly pertinent to postgraduates who may be part-time learners, distance learners, or commencing their postgraduate degree programme at staggered times due to funding.

"Maybe we can take postgraduates for granted. We put a lot of time and effort into undergraduate induction. We might be missing a trick here.
We might need to make an extra effort"
(Senior Management, University).

"Because of my funding conditions, I started my PhD in October, so had missed September induction. The University did facilitate another induction the following March, but at that stage I was nearly six months in, with no idea how to get involved in student voice activities"
(Postgraduate Research, University).

"I think the first semester is so important to promote awareness. Even one slide in the orientation pack. Something along the lines of 'We will be sending out surveys. This is why'.. There's so much to try to fit into the induction space [so student engagement gets omitted]"
(Professional Services, University)

Considerations for good practice:

- Opportunities for postgraduates to network and build a community within disciplines and across the institution via a range of media and forums should be considered.
- Increased social engagement on online platforms for teaching and learning could be considered among postgraduate taught cohorts to support greater involvement in student voice and representation.
- Delivering induction in a blended format (face-to-face and digital) could be considered to better integrate postgraduates into the learning community, which is an important pre-requisite for effective student engagement.
- Embedding student engagement processes into induction can be a mechanism to promote awareness among the majority of postgraduates within the institution from an earlier stage.
- Opportunities for collaboration among students and staff can better support the development of cultures of partnership and ensure postgraduates are more visible across decision-making.

ENCOURAGING INVOLVEMENT: BARRIERS AND ENABLERS TO POSTGRADUATES SEEKING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Several barriers and enablers were discussed across the sector regarding why postgraduates do or do not express interest in partaking in student engagement in decision-making processes. Staff discussed some instances where structures were in place for postgraduate representation, but that these roles were yet to be filled. Four sub-themes emerged through discussion with postgraduates on both facilitators and barriers to 'raising their hand' including lack of time and the need to prioritise, apprehension of raising the student voice, awareness of opportunities, and postgraduate identity within the learning community.

Lack of time and the need to prioritise

The most cited reason for postgraduates choosing not to engage was a lack of time, often compounded by juggling a variety of life demands such as caregiver roles or employment. This is not surprising. As noted previously, postgraduates are typically older than undergraduate cohorts (HEA, 2020) and are more likely to be engaged in part- or full-time employment as well as co-ordinating childcare or other caregiving roles. This can understandably impact on the ability and motivation to partake in student engagement opportunities beyond the immediate learning experience. Where time is often sparse, postgraduates discussed the need to prioritise roles and responsibilities. Postgraduates typically considered student engagement roles as a priority if the role would serve a wider purpose for them. While there was consideration of financial motivation and remuneration for additional activities, where it was available, the most commonly discussed motivation was career purpose. Postgraduates were more likely to be involved if there were transferable skills that they needed to develop, or if they were seeking a greater understanding of higher education processes. Potential transferable skills that could be highlighted to postgraduates include teamwork and leadership, communication, personal effectiveness/development, and entrepreneurship and innovation, all key skills articulated in the Irish Universities' PhD Graduates' Skills Statement (2015) and endorsed by the National Framework for Doctoral Education (HEA and QQI, 2015).

"My time is precious. I want to engage in something that is adding value; to me, to my work, to where I want to go" (Postgraduate Taught, Private HEI)

"For me, my career goal is to transition into academia after my PhD. I put my hand up [to represent my faculty] because I wanted to have a better understanding of higher education processes and structures" (Postgraduate Research, University)

Apprehension of raising the student voice

During this consultation a consistently highlighted issue was an apprehension among postgraduates in stepping into the representative role because of a perceived reputational risk to themselves for raising the student voice, which was cited as a common barrier to involvement. Concern was voiced around the fear of being 'the face' of potentially negative feedback in the class representative role, as well as a need for wider consideration on assuring students that feedback is anonymous. For postgraduate research students, there was concern that offering negative feedback could impact their relationship with their supervisor and/or department. Furthermore, many postgraduate researchers saw themselves as part of the department and by taking on a representative role, they may be perceived as 'the student' with an emphasis on an academic hierarchy. This may well stem from the issue of identity and self-perception which is discussed in further detail on page 16. Mitchell et al (2017) reflect on the ways in which relationships at the postgraduate level are often more complex, including involvement in administrative processes, teaching and learning, and the need for clear articulation of roles.

"Student reps can feel uncomfortable about being the voice of negative feedback"
(Quality Assurance, Private HEI)

"There can be a fear of stepping into a Rep's role and 'causing trouble'. Sometimes there's a concern around 'is this going to affect how the school see me?'"
(Professional Services, University).

"If I were to step into a student representative role within the department, I feel like it introduces that invisible hierarchy into the mix. I'm hoping to join the department as a research fellow in the future. I don't want to be seen as 'the student'"
(Postgraduate Research, University)

Some staff highlighted that there can be a misconception that feedback is always negative. A benefit to offering positive feedback on what is going well in a faculty can impact on other areas of the institution. Reassurance around anonymity of feedback as well as underlining the representative role as a positive one that can shape future higher education structures and processes could be considered as part of wider strategies for postgraduate participation. Indeed, NStEP has sought to build confidence in providing feedback effectively and constructively among student representatives in Introductory Class Rep Training for undergraduates and postgraduate taught students. However, delivery of postgraduate taught training across the country has been hampered by a lack of postgraduate representation structures. To date, no training for postgraduate research students has been developed, and if it were to be, a similar lack of structures would create a barrier to meaningful roll-out.

Promotion of opportunities

The existence and dissemination of student engagement opportunities can vary from institution to institution. Most commonly, postgraduates learned about opportunities via email. Noted issues include the lack of awareness of the process to become a class representative and that there is sometimes uncertainty about who the representative is, if there is one in place. This was even more prominent among postgraduate research students where they 'don't belong to a class'. In this instance, it is more typical to find representative posts for schools, departments, or faculties. It was commonly accepted by postgraduates and staff that there is no

one-size-fits-all approach to promoting student engagement opportunities. Beyond email and other such mediums, suggestions included posters (on campus), linking opportunities by social media (e.g. LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, etc.), and encouraging supervisors or staff within a department to recommend opportunities. While taking up a student representative role, or getting involved in governance or quality assurance, is often just scratching the surface of student engagement in decision-making, a lack of accessibility to these roles is indicative of the wider issues of engagement for postgraduates.

"I must receive at least five or six emails a day from the university, some faculty specific, others more generic. I have to prioritise things, so I typically judge by the email title whether to invest my time into it or not. Sometimes the titles are so misleading though. I've previously missed opportunities to nominate myself as the school representative for PhDs. When I found out about it months later, it had been sent as part of an email about the canteen update."
(Postgraduate Research, University)

Identity within the learning community

The theme of identity within the learning community and how it can impact on student engagement processes was emphasised throughout all discussion forums. This was particularly pertinent among postgraduate researchers who discussed 'blurred lines' between being a student, but also undertaking a number of teaching or academic staff responsibilities such as teaching, correcting assignments, and offering academic guidance to other cohorts, such as undergraduate students. In addition, many postgraduate students can re-enter higher education from a professional background, equipped with a variety of past experiences and responsibility. There was sometimes a sense of detaching oneself from the term 'student'. Preferred terms included 'PhD Candidate' 'Postgraduate Researcher', and 'Doctoral Researcher' which were accepted as 'more professional' terms by those engaged in a postgraduate research degree. Identity challenges among doctoral students is not a new issue. It is widely accepted that doctoral researchers experience several identity transitions as they study, from doctoral student to doctoral candidate, emerging scholar to faculty member (Austin, 2002). This can be further complicated in cases where doctoral students enter their programme having already come from a professional background. Cases also arise where some faculty members are undertaking doctoral studies which can also introduce blurred identities. Issues of identity have been addressed by one international institution, empowering doctoral researchers in engaging in higher level decision-making (See Case Study 3 - University of Strathclyde).

"I feel like I'm in a triangle between student, staff and employee, and not quite knowing where I fit in"
(Postgraduate Research, Institute of Technology)

"You're an individual who has life experience, someone who has had significant responsibility and you're looking to upskill... I get that everyone is a lifelong learner, but I find it quite disrespectful when you're asking me on my perceptions of my learning experience, and emphasising that hierarchy"
(Postgraduate Research, University)

"Postgraduate researchers are also people who work as tutors. It's confusing. Are they being asked to feedback experiences as staff or as students?"
(Academic AHSS, University)

"I'm a clinician by background and went back to higher education to work on my PhD. I actually find it quite offensive being referred to as 'the student' by my department. I was actually asked if I wanted to be the student rep but the term made me feel quite small."
(Postgraduate Research, University)

Considerations for good practice:

- Institutions may consider explicitly highlighting relevant benefits to postgraduate cohorts for participation in student engagement processes. For example, promoting applicable transferable skills in leadership, innovation, communication, or enhancing knowledge of higher education processes.
- Reassuring postgraduates on their anonymity in feedback processes could be considered by institutions or departments when seeking student voice data, which in turn may alleviate the concerns of students who may wish to get more involved in decision-making opportunities.
- Postgraduate student engagement could be considered across communications with postgraduates, with cross-departmental and institutional strategies for encouraging active involvement in student engagement and partnership processes.
- The structures and supports provided to postgraduate representative opportunities could be reviewed in partnership with students and staff with experience in this space, ensuring that clear roles and responsibilities are set out in a manner that is attractive across cohorts and can encourage collaborative cultures.
- The provision of guidance to support the integration and induction of students on to governance structures can ensure more inclusive practices and cultures on committees and project groups, assuaging any concerns of hierarchy and removing barriers to active participation.

Postgraduate Student Engagement
- Case Study 3
University of Strathclyde Doctoral Researchers Group

The following case study was provided to NStEP during the consultation process and is shared with kind permission from the Doctoral Researcher's Group (DRG), University of Strathclyde. The example below outlines a structure which combines core enablers in postgraduate student engagement discussed in this report. These include postgraduate representation, how representatives integrate within committee structures, challenges around identity in learning communities, as well as enhanced community.

Founded in October of 2018, the Doctoral Researcher's Group (DRG) offers the primary source of Postgraduate Researcher (PGR) Representation at the University of Strathclyde. With strong links to university senior management, primarily through the Strathclyde Doctoral School (SDS), the DRG ensures that every PGR at their university has a voice. Despite being a group in its infancy, over 550 Doctoral Researchers actively engaged with the group in 2020.

The Challenge: As is general across the sector, Strathclyde's doctoral researchers found themselves questioning if they were more akin to university staff or students, concluding that due to the nature of postgraduate research they actually fell between the two categories (Figure 1). Further owed to the distinct challenges and issues faced by PGRs, in comparison to other student cohorts, they felt that this prompted the need for a tailored approach to PGR representation and community building.
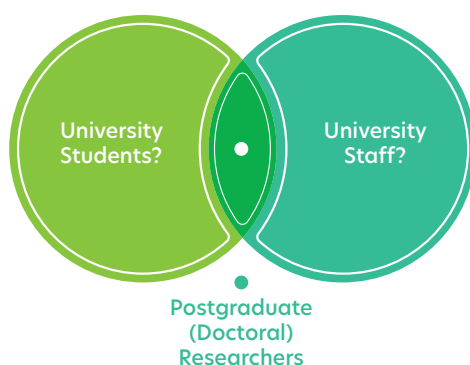

Figure 1: The blurred identity of the postgraduate researcher

The Solution: The establishment of the DRG. In its origin, the group was founded to provide representative voices for the SDS Management Board and other university senior committees. It was also founded outside of the university's Student Union (SU) but now, whilst remaining separate, works alongside the SU in some key areas.

Aims and objectives of the DRG:

- To improve PGR representation throughout the university and its various relevant committees in collaboration with SDS.
- To improve the two-way engagement between PGRs and the SU in collaboration with the Student Exec. Team.
- To communicate to relevant parties within and outside the University the interests and successes of PGRs, and the constraints they face.
- To establish or enhance support frameworks and institutional policies, in collaboration with SDS, which benefit the quality of postgraduate research and improve PGR's experiences.
- To provide a platform for cross-Faculty, and interdisciplinary, events and training for postgraduate researchers of the University of Strathclyde.

How does the DRG work?

|	
PGR Representation:	The larger, general, committee of the group meets at least once a month at the group's Monthly General Meetings. These meetings bring the wider group together for updates on various projects and further create an opportunity for any PGR to raise points of discussion. Through these meetings every PGR is only one step away from university senior management (See Figure 2). Elected DRG Representatives then go on to attend regular university committees, and more recently the university's COVID response groups. DRG faculty reps also attend various faculty level committees.
PGR Support:	The group seeks to identify ways to improve the support provided to PGRs and if possible, work independently, or with SDS/SU, to provide this support. A recent example of this is the DRG's PGR Peer Support Program which provides regular support to over 150 of the approximate 300 first year PGRs.
Events Organisation:	Finally, the group organises PGR focused events. These events range from casual coffee mornings to the annual conference: Doctoral School Multidisciplinary Symposium (DSMS). This conference brings together PGRs from across the university to present their research in an accessible way. In 2020 DSMS had close to 400 registrations and a very strong social media presence.
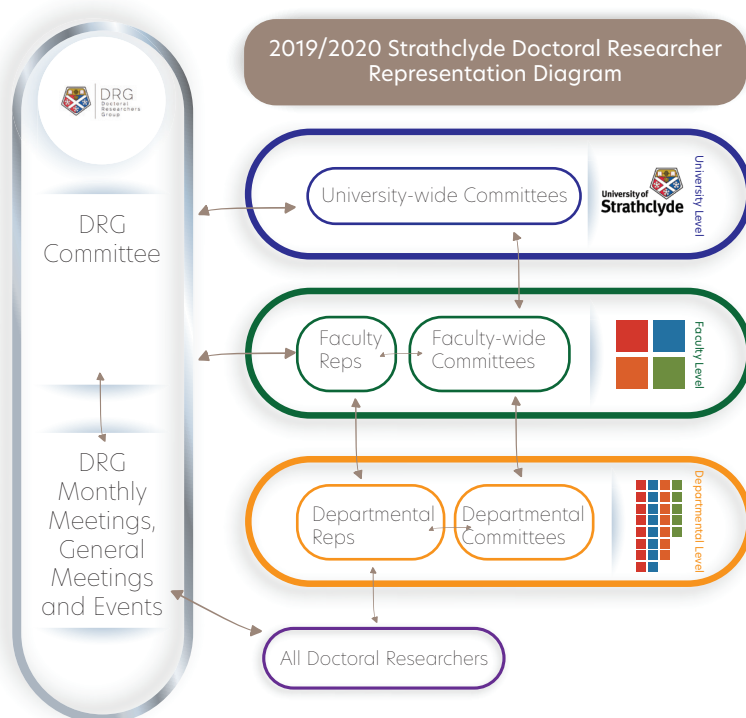
Figure 2: Representation Diagram (Reproduced with kind permission from the DRG)

What is the structure of the DRG?

All doctoral researchers at the University of Strathclyde are eligible to join the DRG and its committee – which works to organise its various projects. The group's large general committee (Figure 3) is itself helmed by a senior committee, consisting of the year's elected chair, cochairs and faculty reps, often with the outgoing chairs also joining in an advisory capacity. This ensures consistency of support and direction. Sub-committees are also established annually to allow for spread of resource and focus.
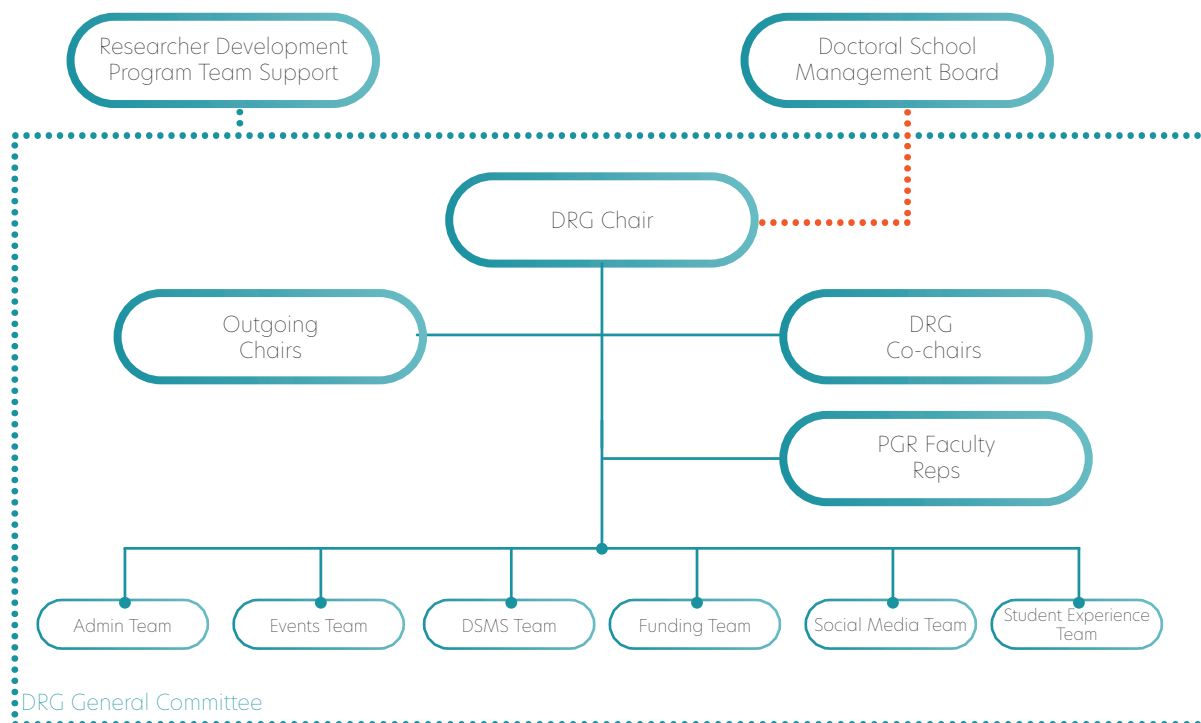

Figure 3: DRG Structure 2019-20 (Reproduced with kind permission from the DRG)

How does the DRG fit in with the Student's Union?

The DRG, while separate, collaborates frequently with the SU. PGRs often view themselves as professionals/researchers, not necessarily students, and this can create a barrier between the SU, which is often perceived to be undergraduate (UG) focused, and the PGR community. The DRG hence strongly seeks three-way collaboration between themselves, the university (primarily SDS), and the SU (Figure 4). The DRG believes that there is a wealth of support that SUs can provide to PGRs, but this needs to be communicated in the right way, with tailored language. A main benefit of collaboration between the SU and the DGR is the provision of effective communication to the PGR community.
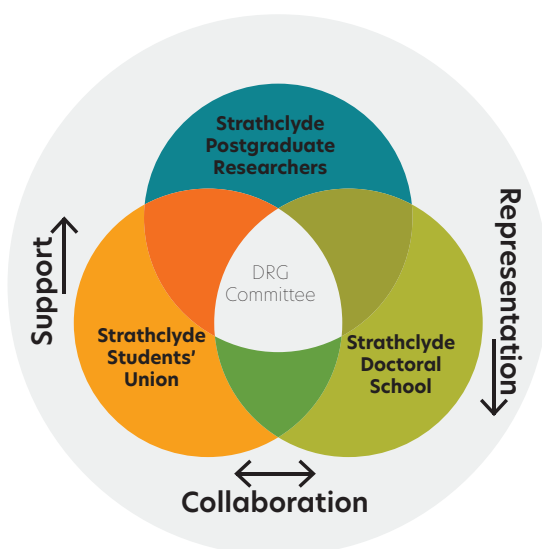

Figure 4: Relationship of the DRG Committee with Strathclyde Doctoral School, Students' Union, and Postgraduate Researchers

What are the main benefits of the DRG?

- The main benefit is a genuine sense of community for an often-isolated PGR cohort.
- This is predominantly achieved through the organisation of both academic and social events such as the annual research conference DSMS and the PGR peer support network.
- Further to that, the DRG provides a platform which recognises the differences between PGRs and UG and postgraduate taught students. It indirectly addresses the blurred student-staff role by working closely with both university staff and the SU, raising the profile of PGRs throughout the institutions with a strong representation structure, thus imbedding the PGR voice and perspective in ongoing university developments.
- While PGRs themselves are the main recipients of the benefits offered by the DRG, it is recognised that many of the projects and events which are organised are also of great benefit to the university, such as DSMS being used to advertise and showcase the research completed by the institution.

What advice would the DRG give to other institutions looking to develop a similar initiative?

- It is key to have buy-in from both PGRs and the university itself, especially in the form of 'championship' from a senior university staff member. The DRG was fortunate to be founded simultaneously with SDS, currently directed by Prof. Eleanor Shaw, Associate Principle, and this relationship has been fundamental to the impact created by the DRG. This senior management connection is also extremely useful in terms of providing recognition of effort, thus motivating PGRs; in 2020 Strathclyde's Principal & Vice Chancellor Prof. Sir Jim McDonald spoke at the DRGs AGM, providing recognition from the highest institutional level.
- Also of high importance is a robust pipeline of group leadership and succession planning. PGRs are typically enrolled with a university for 3-4 years. This means that a PGR who becomes involved in the group in their first year can grow their involvement as their knowledge and experience develops.
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, institutions must recognise that PGRs, in terms of their age demographic, experiences, day-to-day work, and more, are different to PGT and UG students. Institutions should tailor their language and events to reflect this; by name alone SUs may present a barrier for PGRs who no longer identify as students.

THE FEEDBACK LOOP: COLLECTING, ADDRESSING AND CLOSING THE FEEDBACK LOOP

Several sub-themes emerged among both postgraduate and staff cohorts around the collection of feedback including methods and the timing of collection.

Methods of feedback collection

Postgraduates and staff discussed a variety of methods of feedback collection during NStEP discussion forums, both formal and informal. In general, collecting feedback through several mediums was considered the best approach. Staff underlined the importance of formal feedback structures in order to inform an evidence-base for the institution. Postgraduates, on the other hand, had no preference for formal or informal methods as long as feedback was heard, addressed, and when not addressed, the rationale explained. Of interest, a minority of postgraduates discussed the value of 'a face to the feedback', underlining a value placed on institutional staff promoting feedback mechanisms in person (e.g., at the start or end of a lecture). This could, to a degree, add an authenticity to the process, where there was often a sense that postgraduates' feedback was tokenistic, or a 'tick-box' exercise. Class representatives themselves may experience challenges in collecting feedback from the cohort they represent, particularly since the transition of teaching and learning to an online platform during the pandemic.

Timing and Anonymity of Feedback

Both postgraduate research and taught students discussed a variety of enablers and barriers to providing feedback within their institutions. For postgraduate taught students however, the issue of timing of feedback was sometimes a concern where there was a belief that providing feedback prior to assignments or exams being marked, could impact negatively on grades. This fear could sometimes be compounded by emails advising that the HEI survey was unique to them. Several solutions were suggested to overcome this barrier. First, postgraduates suggested considering the timing of collecting feedback, recommending collection post-grade. This could pose potential ethical issues however, where the postgraduates in question would not be in a position to experience any change (Keane & Mac Labhrainn, 2005). In this instance, there could be opportunities for informal feedback mechanisms mid-semester in addition to more robust mechanisms post-module. Secondly, expanding methods of collection could be considered. Enhancing the role of representation and staff-student collaboration would also ensure the ability to more actively communicate about feedback opportunities, rather than solely through traditional email and VLE channels, reducing the chance for misinterpretation.

The Challenge: *There is often no one-size-fits-all approach in communicating to students, particularly postgraduates. The pandemic further constrained communication strategies where other on-site approaches were no longer available (e.g. notice boards, SU information desk, etc.)*

The Solution: *The use of Instagram Stories to capture real-time feedback and queries.*

Aims and Objectives:
1. To capture real-time feedback and queries
2. To highlight events and opportunities

How it works: Maynooth Students' Union (MSU) operate the @maynooth_su and @msu_vlogs Instagram pages which are geared towards all students and prospective students at the HEI. For postgraduate students, the MSU Executive Postgraduate Representative can capture 'stories' to provide any updates, offer a platform for Q&As, as well as upload a live 'Feedback' option to check if PGs have any queries prior to the Rep attending any meetings.

Key Enablers:
- Instagram is a free platform to use in which prompt feedback can be received in real-time.
- The Stories feature allows for posts to be saved as a highlight on the main page.
- There is a high following rate of circa 10,000 individuals (@maynooth_su ~8,000; @msu_vlogs ~ 2,000) although it is impossible to determine how many of these are current postgraduate students.

Learning to date:
- It has proven difficult to set up a platform dedicated to postgraduates. Length of degrees is often short (~one year for most Taught Masters). It is difficult to gauge percentage of audience that are current postgraduates, however the use of the universal MSU platform with greatest reach can avoid duplication of effort.

Addressing and Closing the Feedback Loop

Postgraduates discussed the importance of knowing that their feedback would be 'heard'. There was an acknowledgement that sometimes feedback could not be addressed, but in these cases, transparent communication on the rationale for this was well received. Staff members acknowledged variations in feedback processes, where closing of the feedback loop varied across and within institutions.

"Postgraduates need to see real change. I say 'real' on purpose. I think we all want to be listened to as human beings."
(Academic, Private HEI)

"I have found myself much more likely to engage in feedback processes because my institution has been so transparent about it. We're given a summary of feedback collected, we're told how it's being addressed, and by what stage it will be addressed. We're also advised on what couldn't be addressed and why. It's that transparency that gives me a lot of respect for my college. Sometimes they can't do everything, but that's fine. Maybe there's this perception that [students] will riot if 'our demands' aren't catered to. That's not the case at all."
(Postgraduate Taught, Private HEI)

"Throughout my PhD, I've lectured [in] undergraduate modules. Every year, I've asked the department for the feedback that students have provided on these modules so I can develop my teaching and learning approach. I've never once received that feedback. This year, I'm now asking who the class rep is, and linking in with them as well as inviting more informal feedback from the students. The whole situation though made me feel that my own feedback as a postgraduate is just a tick box exercise."
(Postgraduate Research, University)

Both the institution and postgraduates can share the responsibility of closing the feedback loop. Several suggestions were made around how to communicate feedback findings and how they were being addressed. Many postgraduates admitted to avoiding large-scale reports and documents, simply preferring 'sound bites' such as short videos, infographics, face-to-face presentations and updates at the end of a class, or an email update. There is no easy solution, but with enhanced representation and engagement structures in place, a partnership approach to feedback can be nurtured. This includes the ways in which feedback is collected, analysed, and acted upon, including the roles and responsibilities both students and staff can play in communication and dissemination.

Considerations for good practice:

- Undertaking a coordinated approach across the institution, in partnership between postgraduate representatives, institutional staff, as well as governance structures, could allow for greater awareness and confidence in feedback processes.
- A collaborative approach to feedback at postgraduate levels would allow for the identification of key actions in promotion and media, timing, and transparency, including postgraduate-specific communications.
- Growing representation and engagement structures would particularly benefit the development of a more effective feedback culture and provide space for more opportunities for postgraduate students to gain valuable experience when working on enhancement initiatives based on student feedback.

The challenge:

CCT prioritises continuous improvement in all College activities, facilities and initiatives. Sectoral engagement, research and enquiry to facilitate identifying and adopting national and international best practice, and strategic planning and implementation provide the foundation for a proactive approach to enhancement. Feedback from stakeholders plays an important role in this, aiding the College to determine the suitability of proposed initiatives and developments and determining the ongoing benefit of existing initiatives, within the CCT context.

The student satisfaction survey is one of several tools the College uses to secure feedback. The College recognises this process can only be effective where it is deemed to be of value by the students and therefore it is essential that any feedback received is responded to. Dialogue in respect of enhancements, some of which may relate directly to learner feedback or may already be in process and supported by learner feedback, is a central pillar of feedback processes in CCT. This closing of the feedback loop is understood as essential in motivating learners to engage in providing constructive feedback.

Traditionally, Class Reps would be notified of the College's actions or intentions relating to feedback received from learners or initiatives arising from strategic intentions of the College and they would disseminate this to their peers. The pivot to emergency remote learning in March 2020 presented the challenge of finding an alternative approach to closing the feedback loop that would reach all learners while also allowing for students to revisit the information or to access it at a later date.

The solution:

The Closing the Feedback Loop in an Emergency Remote Learning Context project was initiated to make sure students continued to have the opportunity to receive information from the College in response to their feedback but also in relation to planned or recently implemented developments or the continuation of services, supports and initiatives, including those of specific relevance to the new context.

The structure:

A cross-college team including representatives from Student Services, the CCT Centre for Teaching and Learning, the Management Team and the Executive Leadership Team

researched, coordinated and implemented the project, agreeing the timeline, approach and format to be used.

The output of the project would be a short video comprising of image and text-based slides, informing students of recent and new developments and plans that are of relevance to the feedback they had provided as well as those which will be of interest to students in general. This could be as simple as confirming continuation of supports and services that were highly rated in the student survey, or it could be advising of new developments the College had been implementing ready for the next academic year. The video slides would be designed in a way that showed students there was a benefit to providing feedback and hence the format of "You said, and we did…" was introduced. The College actions were not necessarily a direct response to student feedback alone, but this format was helpful as a means of updating students on enhancement initiatives that were of relevance to their feedback. The first slide of each sub-section would summarise what students had indicated in their feedback, followed by a slide that summarised any recent or planned actions of the College.

The benefits:

Primarily there was a notable appreciation for the range of opportunities for students to continue sharing their views and feedback but moving to a loop closing mechanism that reached the entire learner community first-hand was deemed to be a significant enhancement, reducing the reliance on communication through class reps and also reducing the potential for non-receipt of the College response. The use of the video meant it not only had wide reach, but it improved accessibility for students and could be revisited easily.

Learning to date:

In CCT, acquiring and responding to student feedback is a cross college initiative. One of the key aims of the project was to employ mechanisms to promote effective two-way dialogue between the College and learners in the remote learning context. This particular feedback approach didn't operate in isolation but was supported by additional existing feedback mechanisms which were transitioned to the online context. When promoting this feedback opportunity to students, the College took advantage of the online environment by arranging virtual visits to classes to discuss the amended feedback survey, informing students that the College drew upon their feedback and experience to inform enhancements for the upcoming term. The survey was also promoted on social media and through email with similar messaging. By acknowledging to the students that it was a challenging semester and looking for their experience, the relationship was strengthened, and the two-way dialogue aspired to was achieved.

MOVING FORWARD: EMPOWERING POSTGRADUATES AND STAFF TO ENHANCE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Throughout the consultation process, several potential outputs were suggested which could enhance postgraduate student engagement across Ireland in the future. These included:

- Training and resources for postgraduate research student engagement
- Postgraduate representation structures
- Staff networking opportunities
- Recognition of engagement activities
- Future facilitation of meetings and activities online

NStEP hopes to utilise these findings to produce new resources and supports for postgraduate student engagement going forward.

Postgraduate research training and resources

The Report on the *National Student Training Programme 2016-2020* previously underlined the need to develop resources and potential training opportunities that address the distinct challenges and issues specific by postgraduate research students. While both postgraduates and staff echoed this previous recommendation, there was uncertainty around what this could look like. While it was not the objective of this consultation to gain consensus on what a training programme for postgraduate research students should look like, some feedback was provided. An understanding of institutional governance structures as part of training was suggested many times by postgraduates. As these structures differ from institution to institution, this is a training element that is required within institutions themselves. It was suggested however, to develop a flexible framework as a resource that could be applied by institutions when considering how to develop and enhance their postgraduate student engagement processes. Another suggestion echoed by a number of postgraduates included an emphasis on enhancing leadership skills, which aligns well with NStEP's strategic objective of developing student leadership capabilities.

Postgraduate representation structures

Postgraduate research specific training has been developed within some international institutions. Those interested in developing similar programmes within their institution could externally benchmark against other training handbooks internationally which clarify the role of the PGR representative, expectations, and benefits in undertaking the role (University of Glasgow et al, 2014). However, a particular barrier to delivery of training is the lack of clear representation structures at a postgraduate level, arising from various challenges, including lack of role definition, difficulty in the promotion of roles, barriers to the recruitment of students, and a lack of 'class' to represent. Again, institutions face specific barriers and will discover specific solutions, however NStEP could be able to assist institutions and departments in this work.

Staff networking

An unexpected outcome of the discussion forums was the marked benefit that staff members expressed in having a platform to share ideas and experiences of postgraduate student engagement processes within their institution. Staff reflected on the benefits of sharing best practice, on what has worked well within other institutions, and incorporating learning into practice in their own institution. It was suggested in two out of the three staff discussion forums that a nationwide staff network specifically in postgraduate student engagement should be established. While it was not the purpose of this consultation to explore the objectives and delivery of such a network, some feedback was provided in the context of the discussion. This included exploring a nationwide network that could facilitate a platform to share national, local, and international practice, on a semi-regular basis.

Recognition of engagement activities

Although several institutions offer structures to recognise participation in student activities (volunteering, class representation, extracurricular activity), this is inconsistent across institutions and is typically geared towards undergraduate students. The findings of this consultation highlight the need for greater recognition structures for both postgraduates and staff alike, which could incentivize participation. For postgraduates, recognition through ECT credits, formal certificates, and digital badges were highlighted as examples. During discussion forums with staff, attendees reflected upon the need for simple yet effective gestures of recognition for work in postgraduate student engagement by institutions or departments, which could be developed in tandem with other recognition structures. Several ways in which staff contributions and commitments to postgraduate student engagement could be recognised were raised, including a digital badge, recognition as part of continued professional development, training resources, or part of a portfolio. Furthermore, embedding postgraduate student engagement enhancement into strategic planning could make a stronger case for staff to offer their time to the development of new ideas and initiatives.

NStEP's new staff professional development short course and recognition awards for students could provide an effective national vehicle to stimulate this work nationally and locally, as well as providing a chance to share challenges and successes in practice.

"There's no incentive to do this. There's no incentive to build it into your practice. Even a digital badge, some type of training or a certificate would be helpful"
(Professional Services, University)

"It's hard to pin down what this recognition could look like. It could be part of CPD, part of a portfolio or valuable skills that feed into a CV"
(Senior Management, University)

Future facilitation of meetings and activities online

Since the pandemic, virtual meetings have been necessary replacements to the traditional face-to-face format, and in some instances have led to some unexpected outcomes, including increased postgraduate representation at meetings. The extent to which the sector will continue to rely on online platforms will depend on the continued prevalence of the Covid-19 virus, however, due to particular challenges in postgraduate education, it may remain a greater feature post-pandemic than at undergraduate level. This could offer a chance for new national and institutional strategies for integration and participation of postgraduates across decision-making activities.

"There was a period when we had no postgraduate representative at the table. It wasn't because we weren't offering the opportunity, they just didn't show, and this was leading to frustration. I decided to straight out ask the rep [why she wasn't attending] and it turned out that it was all because of timing. All our meetings had clashed with her lectures. It was something as simple as that and we had never asked her if the times ever suited. Once she was able to give input on the scheduling of meetings, she attended nearly every meeting, and was absolutely fantastic."
(Quality Assurance, Private HEI)

"Being a class rep really isn't easy. Sometimes I just finish up a class and I get a notification on my phone for another meeting."
(Postgraduate Taught, Private HEI)

"We've actually decided, going forward, that once everything settles again [following the pandemic], that every second meeting will be held virtually, to facilitate our learner representatives"
(Quality Assurance, Private HEI)

"Since committee meetings have gone online, I've definitely been able to attend [meetings] more often. I live more than an hours' commute away, so I often needed to factor that extra two hours commute time into my decision-making of whether to attend the meeting or not."
(Postgraduate Taught, Institute of Technology)

Considerations for good practice:

- Good practice in postgraduate student engagement structures, including representation, should be explored to provide institutions, staff and students with examples to support collaboration.
- The establishment of a nationwide postgraduate student engagement staff network could provide a platform in which to share practice and develop new initiatives.
- Recognition structures for both postgraduates and staff could be developed to incentivise participation and engagement, further enhancing postgraduate student engagement in Ireland.
- Identification of actions for enhanced postgraduate student engagement processes in strategic policy and planning nationally and institutionally could support a greater emphasis on postgraduate inclusion across higher education.

Conclusion

There are a range of factors that both impede and facilitate postgraduate student engagement in Ireland. This report provides some initial considerations on those factors. The successful development of postgraduate student engagement in decision-making involves the support of a range of stakeholders across Ireland. NStEP will endeavour to provide resources, support, and opportunities to facilitate discourse on improving the ways in which postgraduates and staff can build cultures of partnership, ensuring postgraduate students can play a valued and valuable role in institutional decision-making for the benefit of the entire learning community.

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