

CONGRESS 2020



Lorna
FOR USI PRESIDENT

A MOVEMENT THAT WORKS

LORNA FITZPATRICK HERE, THE PRESIDENT OF YOUR NATIONAL STUDENT MOVEMENT, AND I AM RUNNING FOR REELECTION IN THE UNION OF STUDENTS IN IRELAND.

A LITTLE BIT ABOUT ME:

I am a Wexford native and a graduate of Business and Human Resource Management. I started off in the student movement as an eager and bright eyed Class Representative because I wanted to help fix the issues that my peers were having and bring everyone together by organising class parties and events! Little did I know then, I would spend the next 9 years working on behalf of students to improve their college experience. I was first elected Mature Student & Equality Officer, which was at the time a part-time position in IT Carlow Students' Union and was I was honoured to be elected the Deputy President for Education & Welfare in my final year at college, and went on to twice serve as the IT Carlow Students' Union President. I moved onto being elected as Vice President for the Southern Region with USI and last year at Congress, I had the honour of being elected your USI President. I have dedicated almost a decade to fighting for students and this April, I am asking you to trust in me to do so again for one final year.



MY VISION

A movement that works is a movement that focuses on the issues that directly affect our members. As an organisation, we should continue to work with other organisations that share our overall goals but I strongly believe the Union of Students in Ireland should always ensure we are working to achieve changes that have a positive impact on the lives of students across the Island of Ireland.

This year, we faced some difficult situations - from a storm calling off the national demonstration to an earlier than expected General Election. However, whenever the landscape changed and a new challenge presented itself, we were ready to fight so the student voice could be heard at a national level. Last year at Congress, I told you that I believed USI could really affect change and this year, I believe we have done that.

We have contributed to a huge youth turnout in the General Election. We lobbied each political party to include student issues in their election manifestos, we effectively campaigned and received agreement from the Government to agree to review the SUSI system and delivered the restoration of the Gaeltacht Grant.

I also told you that I thought USI needed to improve how it worked and I believe I have led from the front on this - an overall review of our Governance structures will come to Congress this year, along with concrete plans to enable USI to begin the process of overhauling affiliation fees and implementing a five-year strategic plan.

I have an ambitious plan if I am re-elected President of USI and I have no doubt that I will continue to lead a passionate and dedicated team that will never give up on fighting for every member.

HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING

In the last decade, core funding per student has reduced by 40% while the backdrop of an increasingly competitive funding regime has created a scenario where colleges are fighting against each other for investment. This has to change. All stakeholders agree there is a need for additional investment. The lack of sustainable funding has been identified by the Parliamentary Budget Office as a significant risk for the future of our sector. If elected, I will:

- Lobby for sustainable core funding for higher education institutions. Student support services have faced colossal cuts over the past decade and as a result, students are suffering.
- Lobby the HEA for a transparent spending report that can be accessed by Governing Authorities.
- Ensure that Technological Universities have specific funding allocated to allow them to be established and embedded within the community. The Technological University Research Network (TURN) will play a vital role in setting the future direction of TUs yet there is no student voice on the Network. I will lobby the Department of Education to ensure the student voice is represented on TURN.

BREAK THE BARRIERS

Every day of every week we hear of another barrier that students are facing. We have the highest fees in the EU, we are living out the consequences of poor state management of accommodation, the cost of living continues to rise and student supports have not been reviewed since 2011. Students in Direct Provision and seeking asylum are also being faced with additional non-EU fees. If elected, I will:

- Lobby for an immediate rent freeze and work with other key stakeholders to find a common ground to address the student accommodation crisis on the medium to long term. I will also work with the NUS-USI President to lobby for similar rental protections for students in the North.
- Place pressure on the Oireachtas Committee on Education & Skills to carry out the agreed review of SUSI and lobby the Department of Social Protection to ensure that students applying for Back To Education Allowance have a clear and easy application system while also lobbying for adequate financial assistance that covers the costs of attending third level.
- Call for reform of the Free Fees Initiative, with particular attention to the residency criteria to ensure students who have returned to Ireland to undertake their studies can qualify for the Free Fees Initiative and to the criteria preventing students from qualifying for this initiative if they have attended college in the last five years.
- Work with our members to develop campus groups that work at a local level to break the barriers to accessing education.
- Develop campaigns think-ins across campuses to ensure all students' voices are heard within our campaigns. These think ins will focus on different topics to ensure we can address the issues on campus through on campus actions that link with national campaigns but have local messaging at the core.
- We will work to develop different levels of actions for all students to engage with as our movement is made up of many students from many different backgrounds and our campaigns must be inclusive for all of our members.

STUDENTS IN DIRECT PROVISION

Students seeking asylum or living in Direct Provision are faced with so many additional barriers to accessing education. It is difficult to ascertain the number of people this affects but the reality is that over the past number of years, we have seen more and more students facing deportation orders. We need to provide additional supports and protections for students seeking asylum and living in Direct Provision. If elected, I will:

- Lobby for the introduction of legislative protections for Sanctuary Scholarships that enhances access and provides additional supports
- Develop legal guidelines to support students facing deportation orders for the students and the Students' Union.



STUDENTS' UNION AUTONOMY

Year after year, we hear of Students' Unions being threatened with budget cuts, with seats on decision-making boards being removed and with their previous actions being used against them. This is not good enough and while the changes need to be felt locally, the practices need to be implemented across the country and need to be legislated for to ensure they have a lasting impact. If elected, I will:

- I will work with the Department of Education & Skills to develop a National Student Partnership Agreement following the best practice of our international colleagues.
- I will work with the Department of Education & Skills to develop a Framework for Students' Unions which will pave the way Students' Unions to be given a legislative footing and to be adequately funded to provide a full range of services and representative supports for students.

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability must be a key priority for the year ahead. I believe USI should be focusing on how students can be key partners in the development of sustainable practices. However, we need to be lobbying for system change to ensure the Government takes action to address the climate emergency. If elected, I will:

- Expand partnerships with organisations leading on the climate emergency and Sustainable Development Goals, in a similar vein to our current partnership with STAND.
- Work with the Department of Education and Skills, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, the IUA & THEA to embed the Sustainable Development Goals into the curriculum.
- Lobby the Department for Education and Skills and the Higher Education Authority to place emphasis and provide support to Colleges who invest in sustainable capital development programmes such as low energy buildings.



BREXIT

We know that this year will be vitally important as the UK and the EU negotiate the terms of the Brexit trade agreement. Students need to be heard in these negotiations. It is regrettable that some of the protections included in the original deal that would have supported students have been removed but we can not and should not accept this and must lobby to ensure students are not adversely affected as a result of Brexit. If elected, I will:

- Work with the NUS-USI President and NUS UK President to ensure that students across Ireland and the UK are supported and still have access to key programmes like Erasmus +.
- Lobby the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Oireachtas Committee on European Affairs to ensure they are calling for protections for students when dealing with the EU.
- Add a Brexit update to the National Council agenda to keep Students' Union Officers abreast of updates.



GAEILGE

The Irish Language is a core element of all the work completed by USI and we need to ensure that our members are supported when learning and using the language but also when fighting to have their rights enshrined in law. If elected, I will:

- I will work with the Leas-Uachtarán don Ghaeilge to support An Dream Dearg to ensure the Irish Language Commission in the North meets all of the objectives of the campaign, with particular reference to signage.
- Work with the PR & Comms Manager to ensure USI statements, where possible, are inclusive of the Irish Language.

POSTGRADUATE RIGHTS

The precarious conditions that postgraduates face on a daily basis while paying extortionate fees and receiving ridiculously low pay is a major issue that I want to address further in the coming year. This year, USI developed and launched the first Postgraduate Charter with SIPTU and my goal is to have that implemented across all Higher Education Institutions. If elected, I will:

- Lobby for the Postgraduate Charter to all recognised by all the relevant HEA committees and lobby the HEA to recognise and endorse the Postgraduate Charter.
- Develop a detailed action plan for implementation of the Postgraduate Charter across all institutions.
- I will ensure that USI continues to include Postgraduate issues within key campaigns.

COMMUNICATION

This year, we made changes to the way in which we engage on social media but there is much more we can do. Communicating and engaging with our members is key but we also need to identify and engage with other key stakeholders in the best way. This year, I have engaged with groups that USI may not have traditionally engaged with but I have used the opportunity to explain the student perspective on many issues. If elected, I will:

- Work with the PR & Comms Manager to develop a well rounded and dedicated strategy to reach all key audiences - students, officers, NGO's, elected representatives.
- I will work with members to find out the best method of communication for them. All of our resources are circulated with Students' Union Officers but due to competing priorities, it can be difficult for USI to get reach students on the ground about key campaigns and events outside of Council meetings.

QUALITY HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

This year, we have lobbied to improve quality in many ways from working closely with the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning, QQI and HEA but there is more that we can do to ensure the student voice is engaged in a meaningful manner to improve the quality of our Higher Education System. In reality, student engagement in quality assurance requires a meaningful partnership between students and their Institution which can be lacking. Currently, we are involved in discussions about these but there are other key areas that we can target. If elected, I will:

- Lobby to ensure that higher education institutions are fully accountable and that legislation clearly states that students are members of decision making structures on both a local and national level through engaging with Department of Education Officials when writing the new HEA legislation which can amend other legislation that affects HEI's such as the NCAD Act, IOT Act and Universities Act.
- Develop a formal agreement between USI and the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning, outlining our agreed objectives and requirements.
- Continue to engage in the Strategic Dialogue between USI and the Department of Education & Skills
- Lobby to ensure that all HEA publications that reference students are conducted in partnership with USI to ensure the data being gathered is done so in a student friendly manner so it is as representative as possible.



INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT

USI runs a lot of training and events throughout the year from Students' Union Training to Women Lead or the Postgraduate Symposium. These trainings and events are mandated through Congress and have received really positive feedback this year but unfortunately, there are many students who may like to attend who can't for a number of different reasons. I want to make sure our trainings and events are as inclusive as possible while ensuring they are interactive and valuable. If elected, I will:

- I want to review all of our training events and make them more interactive by increasing use of technology, subsequently reducing our impact on the environment.
- I want to run more online training offerings on suitable topics to ensure all our members can access our trainings
- I want to record different sessions given at our trainings and events and make them available to our members that can then feature as part of local society or Students' Union Campaigns.

MEMBERSHIP BENEFITS

As a member of USI, students have access to specific membership benefits such as a direct line to SUSI for casework issues, access to the SIPTU workers rights centre, campaign materials such as SHAG packs, posters, toolkits and much more. I believe there is more we can do here to build benefits for our members. If elected, I will:

- Build on relationships with Trade Unions and develop new partnerships to provide students with key support when on placements and when they graduate
- Expand partnerships with new organisations and groups to secure additional deals for students
- Develop a standard sponsorship strategy that includes sponsorship packages that can be adapted for key events such as Pink Training and Student Achievement Awards.

CONTINUING THE CHANGE

Last year, I promised to undertake a number of changes within USI to make it a stronger, more accountable and transparent organisation for our members. I have achieved a number of those changes while building and fostering a supportive and constructively critical atmosphere within the organisation. It has taken a lot of time to prepare these changes for Congress but I am confident that they are positive changes for the organisation as they were developed in partnership with students and Students' Union Officers from across our membership. There are still some changes I would like to implement so if elected, I will:

- Conduct a full review of our Constitution and democratic structures.
- Investigate the feasibility of developing a new USI website that is accessible and user friendly. This website will include a log in space for all our members to access all of our resources such as posters, campaign materials and lobbying documents etc.
- Develop a working group to review the policy file and ensure motions are brought to fill any gaps and outdated motions can be repealed.

I stood before you last year asking for your support to lead the change we needed to see within the national student movement. Since then, I have had the absolute pleasure of working with an amazing team of officers and together, we have made great strides towards achieving that change. It has been both an honour and a privilege to serve as your National President this year but as you know, it comes with a huge responsibility and I hope I have lived up to the high expectations that are required of the President of USI.

I have spent the vast majority of the last decade fighting on behalf of students, some of my achievements are on the next page. During that time, things have improved but we have a lot yet to achieve.

I want to continue to lead a team that is dedicated to improving the lives of our members both in and out of the lecture halls. I want to further build upon the work we have achieved this year. Unfortunately, I can't include everything I want to achieve into this manifesto but the policies that are currently on the USI policy file and the motions that are passed at Congress this year will have my full attention.

Place your trust in me, and vote Lorna Fitzpatrick your USI President one more time.

Go raibh maith agaibh,

Lorna Fitzpatrick

SOME ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

- Prepared USI's first Strategic Plan
- Lead an overhaul of USI's Governance Structures to give more authority to students' and Students' Union Officers.
- Lobbied Oireachtas Committee on Education & Skills to agree to review SUSI
- Launched new 10000students.ie campaign to promote SDG's across our membership
- Lobbied political parties to include USI student manifesto asks in their manifestos - every party included at least two of USI's asks
- Prepared and presented a budget and reported financial position of USI at every National Council
- Supported Students' Unions to register thousands of students across the country.
- Launched new Democracy section on USI website to improve accountability
- Supported Students' Union teams across the country in issues affecting them locally
- Oversaw the development of all USI Campaigns and Events
- Introduced additional online training
- Supported all USI Officers to achieve their goals

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