Lorna Fitzpatrick

President

I have had the honour of being your President for the last two years. I am forever grateful to every student and Officer who has engaged with and supported us throughout that time. The last year has been an extreme challenge for everyone but it has taught me that we are a strong and connected Movement.

**Ní neart go cur le chéile.**

### Accessible Education

This is at the core of all that we do, and I can’t give full credit to the work that has been undertaken in every meeting and every campaign, but I hope to give you a view of the highlights.

*SUSI Review*

I have sat on a Steering Group overseeing the SUSI Review which will look at the eligibility criteria, adjacency rates and postgraduate grants. This has been a long-standing lobbying element for the USI and we were successful in getting this into the Programme for Government following the 2020 General Election. The Review Report will be finalised on the 30th of June.

*Royal Irish Academy Higher Education Futures Taskforce*

I am a member of the RIA Higher Education Taskforce which aims to set out a clear vision for the future of Higher Education across the island of Ireland. I am specifically working on the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion brief and the Vision and Value of Higher Education. We are trying to answer the question about what education should look like in 2030 and what investment is needed to get there.

*Accommodation Bill*

The VP Campaigns, VP Welfare and I alongside many Students’ Unions have done extensive lobbying on the issue of accommodation. The legislative timeline is a slow-moving process but we were delighted to see the USI Student Accommodation Bill introduced to the Dail by Sinn Féin with 56 opposition TD’s who have sponsored the bill. We will continue to lobby Government parties to try get their support for this bill to ensure students are treated fairly.

### HEA Legislation

The Deputy President and I have made multiple submissions on the HEA legislation. The latest report contained much of our previous asks however, there is more to do to achieve our goals on the new HEA legislation. This is a once in 50 years opportunity and it is vital that the student voice in governance is clearly outlined within the legislation. Some of our main points include:

* HEI Accountability
* Reporting on student involvement in governance
* Training for Student Governers
* Student representation on Governing Authority & Academic Council
* Student representation within the HEA

### Expanding the Movement

I have worked with the Deputy President and VP Equality & Citizenship to further develop our relationship with Further Education Colleges and Private Colleges with the aim of developing strong and democratic student representative structures. We have also developed a strategy and proposal for the Department to help place our work in this area on a sustainable footing for years ahead.

### COVID-19

COVID-19 has caused so many challenges for students and we have worked incredibly hard to get students issues on the table with the Department and the Institutions. Many challenges remain and we will continue to work to address them.

**€250 payment**

This was not something USI campaigned for as we believe it was, at best, a token gesture. It did nothing to tackle the real financial burden that students and their families are under. It also did not support many students such as international students or students in private or further education colleges.

**Increased SAF**

We lobbied for additional funding for students to cover the additional costs and loss of income faced by many and successfully lobbied and achieved €8 million additional investment in the Student Assistance Fund.

**Laptop lending scheme**

USI played a vital role in creating this scheme by placing a lot of pressure on the Minister and the Department in many ways such as media, private meetings and internal working groups. These laptops went a long way towards bridging the digital divide however, they are not a full solution. USI lobbied for investment in connectivity measures for students but this was not forthcoming. We have tried to address this in other ways such as the Eduroam everywhere project that we are supporting but the Government did not do enough in relation to connectivity, despite our best efforts.

**Communications campaign**

USI developed a campaign which was supported by the Acting Chief Medical Officer and the Minister. This campaign was called “Keep It Small, Keep it Safe, Keep Your Distance” and was aimed at supporting students to meet with friends to avoid isolation but to do so in a safe way. It is important to always note that, USI is clear that a communications campaign alone will not solve many of the issues students are facing, Government policies need to support students and young people.

**SLWE Working Group**

As USI President, I have been selected to chair the Student and Learner Wellbeing and Engagement Working Group which is reporting to DFHERIS. This working group was established in late January and aims to make recommendations to the Dept on initiatives and supports for students in March. The Deputy President, VP Welfare and Mental Health Project Manager have established an advisory group that feeds directly into the Working Group. Student welfare and engagement is not a short-term concern for USI we will lobby to ensure there is a sustainable footing for these issues within the Department.

**COVID members meetings**

Our team facilitated monthly meetings for members to provide space for issues to be raised, a platform for sharing information and solutions and updates on relevant work. It has been a challenge for all, but we will continue to work together to share information, develop strategies and solutions for students.

Organisational Supports

**Team Support**

This year we have had one day in person as a team which was an obvious challenge but one that we have worked hard to overcome. I have worked to create an environment that is open to working together, online, to ensure we achieve our goals. We will continue to work to the highest standards for all of our 374,000 members.

**Office**

In the middle of a pandemic, we had an office move! Gladly, we found a perfect home for USI in the years ahead that will offer affordable and central locality for officers and staff.