Craig McHugh

Vice President for Campaigns

Thank you to every student and officer across the island for their engagement with USI campaigns this year. We’ve done work on everything from improving access to Higher Education to system funding to enhancing the rights of student renters to protecting one’s mental health to issues facing students of a migrant background, and all during a pandemic! This has been a tough year on everyone across the island, particularly students. It’s been a privilege to work on your behalf.

**Education for All**

The Education for All campaign seeks to create a fairer Higher Education system. All politics in Ireland is local and with this campaign, we wanted to recognise that in our efforts. We knew that a large scale march in October was going to be off the cards and the likelihood was that most of our work would need to be done remotely and in small cohorts.

The democratically elected USI Campaigns Strategy committee developed, Education for All which was focused on local actions and local issues aiming to tie them together into several key policy reforms, government and decision makers needed to take to make our system more socially and economically just. The main focus was around a pledge for political representatives to sign and a petition for students to sign.

In September, we launched the campaign through a series of local actions. Several politicians signed up to the pledge and even more agreed to meetings with SU officers to discuss these important issues. Into the autumn, we ran a series of online actions and Students’ Unions were encouraged to encourage their students to call and lobby their TDs and MLAs to sign up to the pledge.

Ahead of Christmas 2020, we ran another Day of action, we focused on the need for politicians to take these issues seriously in 2021. A year which we labelled a defining year for the future of Higher Education funding, with a decision from Europe imminent in the spring. Activists across the country staged socially distant demonstrations outside the offices of local representatives calling on them to Sign the pledge and work toward a more just system. By 2021, we had the support of even more representatives including Ministers Eamon Ryan and Niall Collins.

In 2021, we have revamped our campaign and are currently running a series of events online to promote the calls of the campaign and encouraging students to lobby their TDs for a more just system. We have hosted town halls, information evenings, virtual protests, phone bank lobby sessions and re-launched our website. We have also developed alongside a number of politicians a new bill focused on student accommodation, which I will talk about below.

Overall, this campaign has been great to work on and we look forward to watching it grow as 2021 goes on.

Student Accommodation Bill

Following a campaign in the Summer of 2020, where USI called for several emergency protections to be put in place for student renters in the event of a second spike in COVID infections, we met with Minister Darragh O’Brien to discuss our calls for new legislation. Unfortunately, the minister was not willing to introduce new legislation or emergency provisions. Following this, we began work with Eoin O’Broin TD to develop the Student Accommodation Bill. This bill will address two key areas; one) allowing for students to receive refunds on their accommodation and two) Allow student renters the option to pay monthly for student accommodation.

We have been working hard with student activists, officers, housing groups and the support of several political parties and hope that the government parties do the right thing and vote in favour of it!

**Campaigns across the year**

While I have spent a considerable amount of energy focused on areas around student accommodation and funding, I have worked closely with other members of the exec team on several events and campaigns such as (but not limited to):

**Sexual Health Awareness and Guidance 2021**

We ran our SHAG campaign in February, focusing on Sexual Empowerment, Consent and having safe sex during COVID-19.

**Student Survey 2021**

I sat on the communications sub-group for StudentSurvey.ie. We looked at all kinds of ways to engage students in the roll out of the survey . This was considerably more challenging than other years seeing as “field work” would now have to be done online entirely.

**#StartHere**

We worked with Active Consent, to develop the #StartHere campaign which empowers people on how to act accordingly if someone discloses an experience of sexual violence to them.

**De-Stress for Success**

We introduced De-Stress for success which explored all kinds of advice regarding exam related stress. We also focused in on the bed-desk cycle many people have become caught up in in the last 12 months.

**Student Nurses and Midwives campaign**

I worked with the USI President and VP Academic Affairs on the campaign lobbying for better conditions for student nurses.

**Migrant Minds Matter**

Working with STAND and the VP Equality & Citizenship , we developed Migrant Minds Matter which focuses on empowering students to advocate on improving the lives of migrant students on Irish campuses.

**The National-Homeless and Housing Coalition+ Raise-The-Roof**

I worked with the NHHC and RTR groups to fight for a more just housing policy in Ireland. I worked with the NHHC in their Comms sub-group to bolster engagement nationally.

**Marking of Days**

We marked several special days in the calendar including World Mental Health Day and International Men’s Day.

**Sustainability campaigns**

We partnered with STAND to develop the SDGs campaign which focused on talking about a Sustainable Development Goal each week and developed a Fast Fashion week.

**COVID Campaigns**

Over the year, our messaging was all about keeping students safe and encouraging them to follow the guidelines. We partnered with the government on a number of initiatives including “Keep it safe, Keep it small, Keep your distance”

**Le Chéile - Togetherness Mental Health Campaign**

Given the ongoing pandemic, we rejigged the Mental Health campaign and developed Le Chéile focusing on raising awareness around several different issues related to Mental Health and Wellbeing.