

ABRIDGED MANIFESTO

FULL VERSION HERE



BETH O'REILLY FOR USI PRESIDENT



Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

Introduction

My name is Beth O'Reilly and I'm running to be your next USI President. I've had the honour of working for students for the past two years - first as Commercial and Fundraising Officer in UCC Students' Union and now as the Vice President for Campaigns with the USI. Throughout my term as VP for Campaigns I have remained committed to decentralising USI and ensuring that the student voice is the core focus of our work. I've had the opportunity to run amazing campaigns like **No Keys, No Degrees, Fuck the Fees** and more! However, this year I have also seen how the culture of the USI has led to many problems - officer burnout, lack of student engagement and lack of outputs to name a few.

These issues can be fixed, but it needs to be a top down approach.

Students need to know what USI is, what the organisation does, and how it benefits them.

Sabbatical officers need to see the benefits of engaging with the organisation, whether this be through media opportunities offered to them, campaign roadshows on campus or well facilitated and informative trainings offered at the beginning of the year.

The elected **USI Coiste Gnó** need to see improved internal communications, better delegation of work load and to feel fully supported and empowered in their own remits.

I am confident that my skills and experience will stand to me in this role, and that I am the best candidate to reshape USI for the benefit of all of our members.

To elect a leader for change - vote Beth O'Reilly No.1 for USI President at Comhdháil 2022.



Supporting Students' Unions

The USI plays a huge role in supporting Sabbatical Officers around the country. Local Students' Unions do trojan work for the students in their colleges and the USI needs to ensure that we can provide as much support as we can to our officers and make it easy to engage with the work of the USI. This support isn't just assisting SU Officers with the problems they encounter over the course of the year - it also means providing adequate training and resources to SU's so that they are confident and equipped to deal with these problems.

Communication with SU Officers

- Create open lines of communication between all USI Coiste Gnó officers and Students' Union Officers to solidify relationships between MO's and the USI officers.
- Survey SU Officers at the beginning of the year to see what the favoured method of communication is.
- Commit to providing a USI Calendar at the beginning of the year mapping out the timelines for all large scale events and campaign weeks.
- Continue the work started this year to centralise sabbatical communications so that officers can engage more efficiently.
- Ensure that I am in regular communication with **all officers**, not just SU Presidents.



SU Officer Training

- Ensure that SU's are provided with media contacts, guest speakers and other useful industry professionals at the beginning of the year to assist them with their work.
- Consult with outgoing and incoming SU Officers on which trainings they would find the most valuable.
- Organise SUT and SUT+ trainings that provide valuable information for officers delivered by industry professionals and end the culture of relying on former USI officers to deliver sessions.
- Ensure a diverse range of trainings for SU Officers that cover a wide range of remits - not just the traditional focus on Education, Welfare and President.

Comhairle Náisiúnta

Engagement with Comhairle Náisiúnta and the working groups has been difficult to rebuild back to pre-pandemic levels. We see a huge turnover of sabbatical officers each year and we cannot operate on the expectation that new officers know how to efficiently engage with USI in a way that best represents the students who pay affiliation fees. If elected, I want to ensure that sabbatical officers are getting the most out of attending our in person working groups and Comhairle Náisiúntí and that the discussions taking place are both valuable, informative and action based.

- Create a centralised location for Comhairle Náisiúnta documentation, campaign brand packs and event promotional materials for ease of access for SU Officers (ideally a new section of the website where sabbatical officers can log in and access all documentation including minutes, agendas and digital materials)
- Provide information for officers at the start of the year on how to most efficiently engage with working groups and Comhairle Náisiúnta so that they feel confident and empowered to represent their students in USI forums. This could be in the form of a session at SUT or SUT+ or an information booklet sent to all SU officers.
- Ensure that Comhairle Náisiúnta working groups are productive - if we're asking our officers to travel to attend, we should finish the weekend having achieved new plans or strategies. Working groups should not just be the chairing member of the Coiste Gnó discussing the work they have done, they should be a space for developing new ideas with SU Officers.

Engaging with Students

The USI is struggling to engage students on the ground as there is currently a lack of events and initiatives aimed specifically at students. Every single student from a USI member organisation is a member of USI and we need to prioritise our student members - after all, they are the ones paying affiliation fees!

Student Voice and Participation

- Work with the VP Equality and Citizenship to re-establish the focus groups for students in minority groups to allow marginalised students to directly contribute to USI work.
- Work with the policy officers to establish similar focus groups that pertain to their remits with students who are engaged with the topics of welfare, academic affairs, citizenship, and accommodation rights.
- Establish regional group-chats of students or class representatives that express interest in being contacted with media requests.
- Ensure that all USI events that are open to students are advertised a minimum of one month in advance, and work with the USI PR and Comms Manager and the Coiste Gnó to achieve this.
- Increased communication with student societies that are engaged with issues we are campaigning on



Communication with Students

The USI has an obvious communication and engagement issue. For too long, we have been relying on Students' Unions to promote our events and campaigns to their students, putting the onus of the work on our already busy MO Officers. Post-COVID, we need to examine what is and is not working about our current communication strategy. I helped to co-ordinate the USI Communications Survey for sabbatical officers, and worked to implement the changes that SU Officers wanted to see, and I would love to broaden this work to find out how students want to engage with USI and meet them where they're at.

This could include;

- The development of a USI student newsletter to update students on the work we are doing (there is already the technology in place on our website to take sign ups for this - we just need to utilise it!).
- Establishing which of our accounts are informative and which are informal, as the tone shift can be jarring and results in less followers overall.
- Increased informational posts that break down high level issues for students to help empower them to be engaged.
- Monthly video updates showcasing the work of the USI Coiste Gnó.

Our outputs are often the main way that students are first introduced to USI and we need to make sure that we are actively trying to make content that will engage as many students as possible - not just providing information for those who are already engaged.



Team Management

The USI President is not just the main spokesperson for the organisation. In my opinion, the most important aspect of the job is the president's role in team management. This year, we saw a huge drop in outputs due to poor delegation and organisation, and I want to ensure that each Coiste Gnó officer feels supported in the work they hope to achieve.

Work Plans

The USI Coiste Gnó officers each submit plans of work to be approved by Comhairle Náisiúnta. However, these plans of work are often completed on an individual level and provide no room for collaborative efforts between officers. I want to ensure that these plans of work are completed as a team as officers rarely work on any large scale plans on their own.

- Provide Comhairle Náisiúnta with an overall team plan of work, listing the most important campaigns and events and when Comhairle Náisiúnta can expect them to be rolled out.
- Commit to a USI calendar of events at the start of the year, and ensure that the USI PR and Comms Manager and General Manager are aware of these dates so that deadlines for materials and graphics are not missed.
- Include "Plan of Work Updates" in the agenda of our weekly Monday Morning Meetings as a Coiste Gnó so that officers can update on how the projects they committed to at the beginning of the year are progressing.

Oversight

Currently the Coiste Gnó must ensure that every output receives the approval of the President. Not only does this process slow down our rate of outputs massively, it has also stagnated the creativity of the Coiste Gnó and led to a lack of confidence among the officers to be more innovative and radical in their planned actions. I want to change the culture of needing presidential oversight on every decision, and give the Coiste Gnó the confidence to be creative in their work. Each Coiste Gnó Officer is elected by Comhdháil for a reason, and their skills and ideas should not be dampened by the perceived hierarchy of the organisation.

Accountability

Your Coiste Gnó are elected to do the work set out by the mandates decided upon at Comhdháil. Constitutionally, Section 5.15.2 sets out that an up to date procedures manual that covers "grievance, disciplinary, dismissal and bullying and harassment procedures as well as codes of conduct" should be approved by Comhairle Náisiúnta every three years. There is currently no procedures manual in the Constitution (which should appear in Schedule I) which means that there is ultimately no disciplinary procedure for an officer who is not engaging with their mandated work other than removal from office. We need to have outlined procedures for the USI Coiste Gnó to ensure that there is a streamlined procedure for dealing with any misconduct. If elected, I will ensure that a procedures manual is brought before Comhairle Náisiúnta, and that both Coiste Gnó officers and members of Comhairle Náisiúnta have the opportunity to feed into the document.

Role Reviews

The roles of the Regional Vice-Presidents' and the part-time Vice President for Postgraduate Affairs are in need of review. You elect these officers every year to work for you, and the structure and workload of the role needs to be achievable for you to get the most out of your USI Officers. As well as this, we need to ensure that our regional VP's are able to engage efficiently with our merged Technological University member organisations - especially those where the campuses are spread across more than one region. I will ensure that these role reviews and any constitutional amendments required are brought forward no later than Comhdháil 2023.

External Organisations and Stakeholders

The USI Coiste Gnó sit on a huge amount of boards and committees as part of their work, and often these meetings can take up the majority of our working hours in a week. Unfortunately, a majority of these committees are merely offering us a seat to "placate" the student voice, and rarely act on the insight provided by the Coiste Gnó. This year, I have already started collating the boards and committees sat on by all Coiste Gnó members (as no such list existed) so that we can evaluate which are the most valuable, and which may be better suited to officers of another remit. Engagement with other organisations is hugely important to help promote our aims of publicly funded education and affordable housing for all, however we primarily work for the students. Students are the most important stakeholder in this organisation and we need to ensure that Coiste Gnó officers are not being used for their expertise by other organisations at the expense of their ability to engage with students.

Students' Union Autonomy

The often tense relationships between HEI's and Students' Unions has brought a number of issues with regards to students' union autonomy to the forefront of the agenda this year. I want to ensure that the work of the Students' Union Autonomy Taskforce is continued and has actionable outcomes that ensure students' unions are not at risk of getting their funding withdrawn for standing up for and representing their members.

- Ensure that the USI has information in relation to the structures and funding of every Member Organisation through data collection. We need to be sure that we are working towards the autonomy of all unions and we need to know where all of our members are to know where to move forward from here.
- Develop a long term strategy for a task force comprising of SU representatives and students' union staff dedicated to the issue of SU autonomy and the legal definition of a Students' Union.
- Lobby for the HEA to centrally negotiate a framework to determine the nature of the relationships with HEI's and SU's.
- Continue to advocate for students' union funding to come from a centralised body such as the HEA to avoid the conflict of interest with SU's being funded through their own HEI's.



Publicly Funded Higher Education

The USI have always been staunchly at the forefront of the fight for publicly funded higher education. With the imminent release of the Cassell's Report, and the potential for a reduction in the Student Contribution Charge - we need to ensure that we are not becoming complacent in our demands. While any reduction in the amount of fees currently paid by students is welcome, we cannot lessen our demands for publicly funded education for all.

Cost of College

Every year the USI runs a national Higher Education Funding campaign, however this campaign rebrands itself every year. We have had Break the Barriers, Fund Our Future, Education for All, and many more. This constant rebranding has a negative impact on our level of engagement with students and other stakeholders, and since we are fighting towards a long term goal - we need to be working off of a long term campaign. Through my work as VP Campaigns, I have already taken the steps to establish Cost of College as a long running campaign to make it easier for students and Students' Unions to engage with the work and goals of the campaign and I hope to continue this next year.

- Work with the VP Campaigns to develop a long term strategy for achieving publicly funded higher education
- Work with the NUS-USI team to ensure that the long term strategy of the campaign is inclusive of students in the North
- Strengthen connections with trade unions to ensure more cross sector support of USI run campaigns
- Establish a designated portal for student feedback on all campaign actions so that incoming Coiste Gnó teams have access to all campaign feedback upon entry into the roles.
- Stand firm and unapologetic in our messaging that publicly funded education is a public good - and unequivocally cannot come at the cost of further funding reductions for the sector as a whole.
- Ensure that USI stands in solidarity with staff strikes and encourage Students' Union officers to do the same. The underfunding of higher education has a negative impact on all of our members, and this is inclusive of postgraduate student staff.

Cassell's Report

We have been awaiting the release of the Cassell's Report for years and have seen it consistently be pushed further down the track. Despite multiple promises that it would be released in 2021, and early 2022 - we are still waiting for it's recommendations to be implemented. With the impending crossover of different government briefs at the end of 2022, we need to ensure that whoever takes over the ministerial brief of Higher and Further Education knows that we are not willing to wait any longer.

- Empower students by educating them on what the Cassell's Report is and why it is so important to the future of higher education
- Continue work with the Education Futures Committee to promote the upcoming release of the Cassell's Report
- Work with the VP for Campaigns to ensure that there are strong actions allowing students to productively engage with the issue of the Cassell's Report and demanding publicly funded higher education moving forward.
- Ensure that updates are provided following any conversations with the Department of FHERIS so that students are aware of what is going on in any high level committees that USI sits on.

International Students

The current high cost of international student fees is directly linked to the underfunding of our higher education sector as a whole. The drastic underfunding of our HEI's has led to university, IOT and TU management teams striving to bridge the funding gap by exploiting our international students. Since every HEI sets their own international fees, these management teams are directly responsible for the high costs of international student fees - and while the underfunding of the sector is a *reason* for these high fees - it is not an excuse! The USI needs to support students' unions in their work lobbying for the reduction of international students' fees, and we need to engage directly with international students to allow their voices to shape our actions. Working with the VP Equality and Citizenship, I want to establish an International Student Focus Group to ensure that our actions are led by those affected most.

Creative Arts Students

Creative Arts students are often negatively disadvantaged by falling between the intersection of the DFHERIS and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. As well as this, creative arts courses receive significantly less funding per student than more traditional courses. I want to ensure that these unique struggles are highlighted and that the government commits to the outlined demands of the Creative Arts Working Group - work that I have already started on as part of my role as VP for Campaigns this year. We also need to ensure that we establish formal partnerships with trade unions such as Praxis, that represent students in the sector, so that we can stay informed on any of the issues that affect the students we represent.



Accommodation

The issue of access to student accommodation is certainly not a new one, and with a devastating housing crisis across Ireland it is not an issue unique to students. This year, we saw the negative impact of student accommodation existing between two departments - the Department of Housing and the DFHERIS. While these departments are supposed to meet frequently to discuss the intersecting issue of student accommodation, no such meeting has taken place since the beginning of the academic year. It is disgraceful that the government who released a strategy claiming to offer “Housing for All” have let so many students fall by the wayside by appearing to just ignore the issue of student accommodation shortages, misuse and rent hikes. In the Housing for All plans, barely any mention is given to student accommodation, and the government’s Student Accommodation Strategy (2017) is hugely out of date as it does not take into consideration the effects of COVID-19 on both the construction industry and the numbers of students seeking accommodation.

Government Lobbying

- Highlight the need for cross-departmental meetings to discuss the issue of the student accommodation crisis.
- Fight for TU’s and to have access to borrow funds to build affordable PBSA.
- Demand increased rental protections for students; particularly those in digs style accommodation, and fight for an immediate rent freeze for all students.
- Advocate for an updated version of the Student Accommodation Strategy to be completed as soon as is possible.

Supporting Grassroots Action

- Maintain USI’s close partnership with the National Homeless and Housing Coalition and Raise the Roof.
- Support the formation and development of student co-operative housing.
- Work with the VP for Campaigns to assist Students’ Unions and students with the coordination of rent strikes where needed.
- Work with the VP for Campaigns to update the USI Student Accommodation Position Paper to ensure that it is more reflective of the issues currently facing students.
- Work with SU’s to submit planning applications against any unaffordable or luxury student accommodation complexes.

Political Engagement

The political messaging of the organisation is led by the USI President. As a result, to have a radical union that's actively fighting for real social change - we need a radical president who is politically engaged and ready to take a stance on the issues that impact students. I want to ensure that as a union, we remain at the forefront of the social change needed in the USI and NUS-USI regions, and stand in solidarity with other groups advocating for the same goals.

Divestment

Our HEI's are directly funding industries that the student movement has always stood staunchly against - including the fossil fuel industry, the war and arms industry and direct provision. We need to work with our Member Organisations to understand the scope of the investment portfolios of our HEI's as it is our members' money that directly goes to funding these industries. The USI, as leaders of the national student movement, needs to be leading in the calls for divestment from these industries and as President I will ensure that the need for divestment is brought to the forefront of our work with HEI's.

Direct Provision and Student Asylum Seekers

The USI has done so much work to highlight barriers to education, but not enough has been done to dismantle the barriers facing students in direct provision and student asylum seekers. If elected USI President, I will;

- Lobby the government to ensure that any additional protections offered to Ukrainian student asylum seekers are extended to **all** student asylum seekers.
- Work with the DFHERIS to establish English language classes for student asylum seekers
- Work with MASI and the Irish Refugee Council to ensure that the student movement stands in solidarity with campaigns to end direct provision.
- Work with the VP Equality and Citizenship to develop a strategic paper outlining what to do when a student is given a deportation order, and ensure it covers potential engagement from the HEI, the Students' Union, students and of course the student themselves.
- Lobby for the extension of domestic fee status to all students who are asylum seekers.

Postgraduate Students

Postgraduate students engage in such vital work both in the spheres of research and teaching. Despite their intrinsic value to our HEI's they are so often exploited, underpaid and still fighting for recognition as workers. The USI often struggles with postgraduate representation, as we only have one part-time VP for Postgraduate Affairs representing the tens of thousand postgraduate students in our MO's, and of our MO's, only 2 have full time postgraduate officers.

Postgraduate Workers Rights

- Work with the VP Postgraduate Affairs and the VP Campaigns to update the USI Postgraduate Workers Rights Charter, ensuring that we make student feedback central to any amendments.
- Lobby the HEA to formally recognised the amended Postgraduate Workers Rights Charter.
- Ensure that all officers of the Coiste Gnó, not just the VP Postgraduate Affairs, are engaged and informed on postgraduate issues to ensure for better work delegation and more inclusive campaigns and events.
- Utilise the data compiled from the Postgraduate Student Survey developed this year to lobby for an end to stipend disparity across all HEI's.

Postgraduate Mental Health

- Work with the VP Welfare, VP Postgraduate Affairs and VP Campaigns to ensure that a postgrad specific mental health campaign is developed to be rolled out annually.
- Work with the VP Welfare and VP Postgraduate Affairs to compile data on the postgraduate specific supports offered by all of our MO's.
- Ensure that the VP Welfare and VP Academic Affairs co-ordinate postgraduate specific training for SU Officers who engage with casework.

Postgraduate Representation

- Assist our MO's with the development of further postgraduate representative positions.
- Conduct a review of the VP for Postgraduate Affairs role and investigate the possibility of introducing more specialised positions for postgraduate taught and postgraduate research positions.
- Ensure that all Coiste Gnó officers attend the Postgraduate Working Groups so that work can be delegated to full time officers in the event that the Postgraduate Affairs Officer is unable to complete mandated work within their contracted working hours.
- Establish connections with postgraduate student societies in the event of an MO having no formally recognised postgraduate representative.

Gaeilge

The inclusion of Gaeilge is so often an afterthought across USI campaigns and events. We need to ensure that the use of Gaeilge is central to the processes of developing our campaigns and actions, and I will work with the Leas Uachtarán don Gaeilge to ensure:

- The work of the LUdG is no longer filled with translational duties and instead all of USI's translational work is sent out of house - utilising our partnership with Dréimire to achieve this.
- An increase in all campaign materials as Gaeilge to be provided to MO's, including both digital and physical materials.
- All MO officers are able to attend Gaeilge Working Group, as often it does not fall under a specific sabbatical officers remit - and make changes to Comháirle Náisiúntí timetables as needed to achieve this.
- USI support for grassroots organisations fighting to promote the Irish language, including Mísneach, An Dream Dearg, Cumainn Ghaelacha and more.
- The development of an Irish language strategy paper to shape the work of the USI and ensure that the use and promotion of Irish is central to our aims and objectives.
- Irish language lessons for Coiste Gnó members who would like to learn Gaeilge, and investigating the possibility of this being rolled out to all MO sabbatical officers.



NUS - USI

The trilateral agreement between NUS UK, NUS-USI and the USI is such a hugely important part of our organisation, but it is rarely treated as such. We need to ensure that we are working closely with the newly elected NUS-USI President to truly represent all of our member organisations. As well as this, to strengthen the trilateral agreement, the USI Coiste Gnó should be introduced to the NUS UK team to compare our goals and aims for the year and get inspiration from those who are engaged with student issues on a national scale.

Engagement with NUS-USI MO's

- Ensuring that USI Officers attend all large scale NUS-USI events and protests.
- Ensuring policy officers visit campuses in the NUS-USI region
- Investigate the possibility of reducing Comhdháil fees for MO's in the NUS-USI region to facilitate their attendance at Comhdháil, bearing in mind that they have three national conferences to attend each year.
- Work with the VP for Campaigns and the NUS-USI President to ensure that there is at least one collaborative USI and NUS-USI campaign aimed specifically at FE engagement in USI.
- Work with the NUS-USI President and the VP for Campaigns to link all campaigns that are applicable to both regions, as was done earlier this year with the No Keys, No Degrees protests.



Technological Universities and Merger Unions

With the majority of our IOTs now merging to form technological universities, the USI needs to be vocal on any issues that arise for students or students' unions as a result of these mergers. We have a vital role to play, not only in ensuring that these mergers go as smoothly as possible for the Students' Unions involved, but also on following up with Students' Unions that have been through mergers and ensuring that the national union is informed on any issues so that we can provide advice and guidance to all our MO's - no matter where they are in the merger process.

Support for Merger Unions

- Facilitating the Mergers Working Group at Comhairle Náisiúnta and ensuring that we come up with monthly action items.
- Lobbying the DFHERIS for increased funding to ensure that support services are available to all students, no matter which campus they are studying on.
- Continuing the fight for TU's to have access to the same funding for accommodation building as their university counterparts (this is something that has been guaranteed by the government multiple times but still has seen no action).
- Provide a constitutional toolkit for Students' Unions who are undertaking constitutional referenda to facilitate the merging of their unions.
- Seek clarity on the future role of THEA and its support to the remaining IOTs.





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