



**MAINTAINING AND
STRENGTHENING STUDENT
VOICE IN IRISH HIGHER
EDUCATION**

**Supporting Student Engagement
during the Covid-19 Crisis**

INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES TO STUDENT ENGAGEMENT DURING COVID-19

Staff and students in Irish higher education have gone into social distancing mode, and that means that the usual face-to-face environment where issues can be raised and problems can be solved together has disappeared. This Report is part of the National Student Engagement Programme's efforts to support staff and students to communicate, collaborate, and maintain effective student engagement during the Covid-19 crisis. The guidance will focus on how to maintain formal mechanisms for student representation and on how to utilise them effectively. Institutions may also find this guidance useful for creating temporary solutions such as staff-student meetings that do not have any formal role currently in their governance.

As higher education transitions to online teaching and learning, assessment, and support services, it is vital that formal mechanisms in institutional governance where the student voice is traditionally well-represented remain accessible and prioritised. Institutional strategies, supported by departmental and programme level student engagement, can ensure that contingencies now will provide confidence in the long term. Many of the changes in teaching and learning being decided and implemented at the moment will become everyday good practice in future, even though in the short term these changes may be highly disruptive. Strengthening and adapting student engagement practices now will not only assist in mitigating disruption and maximising communication, but will also contribute to long term collaboration between staff and students as new practices are embedded.

Please see also the NStEP Quick Guides series, published to support the Irish higher education sector during the Covid-19 pandemic:

- Quick Guide for Effective Staff-Student Committees (SSCs)
- Quick Guide on Hosting Online Staff-Student Committees
- Quick Guide for Class Reps
- Quick Guide for Staff Who Teach

Section 1:
Student Engagement and the Student Learning Experience

The three domains of student engagement set out in the 2016 Report from the Higher Education Authority on Student Engagement in Decision Making act as a basis for actioning effective student engagement across an institution. These three domains are teaching and learning, quality assurance, and governance and management. NStEP has worked since that Report was published to support meaningful student engagement practices across these first three domains. A common feature of this work has been the involvement of student representatives, which necessitated particular tools for capacity building to ensure effective peer-to-peer student engagement. In 2019 the 'fourth domain' was added to the conceptual framework (figure 1) recognising the need for legitimate representation and engagement structures across the student body. This Report will assist in informing staff, students, and institutional leaders on how the fourth domain of student representation can formally interact with and support efforts within the other three domains.

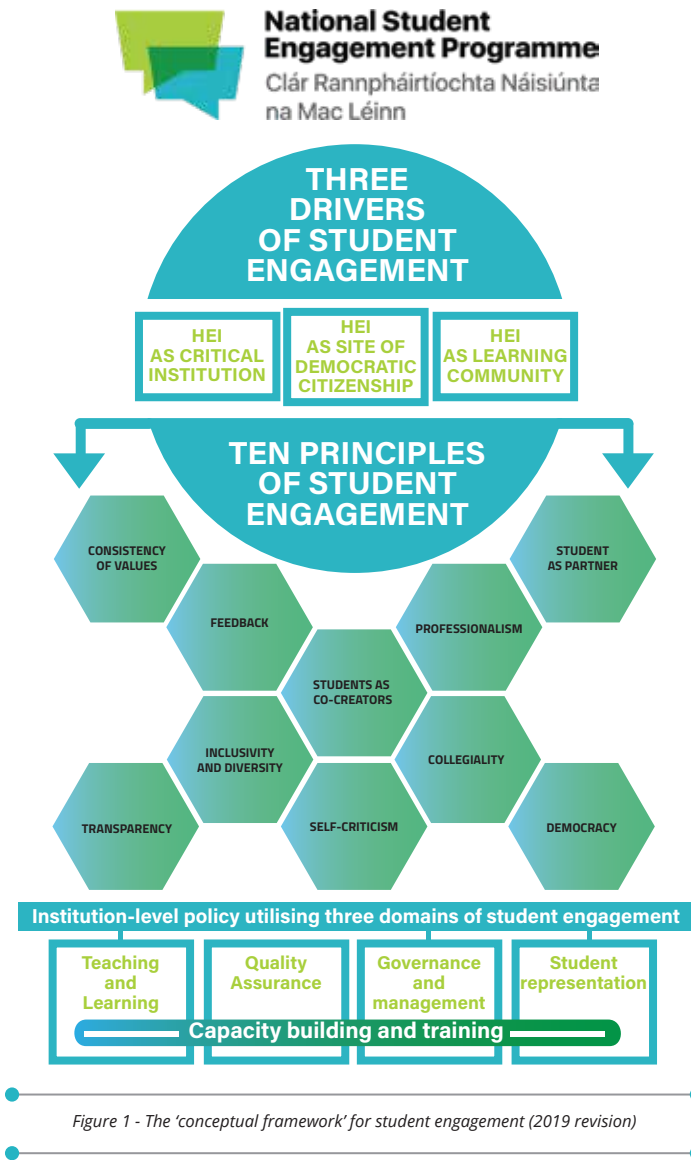


Figure 1 - The 'conceptual framework' for student engagement (2019 revision)

Each of these four domains has a direct impact on a successful 'student learning experience' or SLE (figures 2 and 3), which provides the basis for NStEP Class Representative training each academic year. The SLE was developed by sparqs - Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland. For institutions it is useful to consider decisions that are taken within and across the domains against the impact such decisions can have on the learning experience. The SLE has been widely disrupted for both students and for staff by the immediate need to transition to online delivery and assessment, therefore the use of the SLE model may provide a common understanding for engagement at a time of interrupted delivery. Please note, that NStEP does not currently have an SLE model for postgraduate research students.

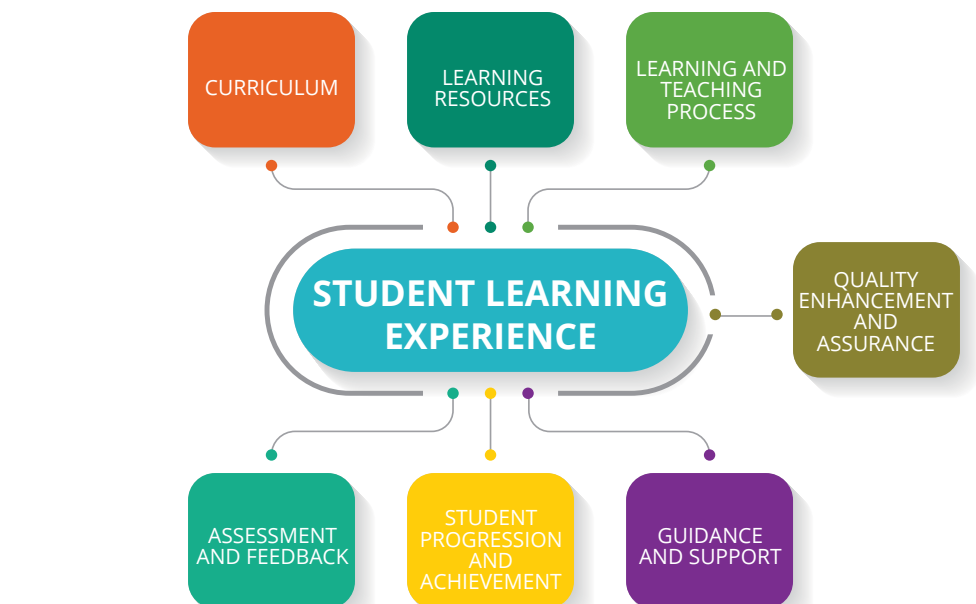


Figure 2 - the Student Learning Experience (SLE) for undergraduates

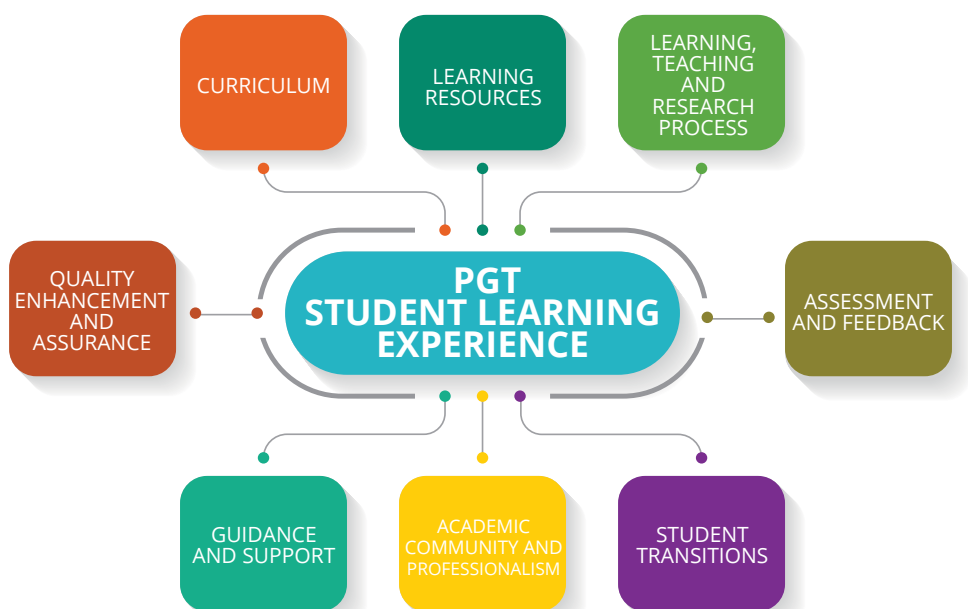


Figure 3 - the Student Learning Experience (SLE) for postgraduate taught students

Section 2: The Role of Student Representation

Thousands of student academic representatives (most commonly Class Reps, but also including School and Faculty representatives) are elected across Irish higher education institutions each year. The perception and the remit of these roles has changed in an era of 'student as partner' or student partnership, bring

ing a new capacity-building focus to strengthen engagement in a more complex environment of governance and quality enhancement, rather than simply relying on Reps to “raise issues”.

In the rapidly changing world of Covid-19 it is possible that momentum could be lost in the work of developing partnership between students, staff and their institutions. However, of even more pressing concern is the possibility that the more traditional role of student representatives - “raising issues” - could easily be frustrated and hampered as large changes are designed, agreed and implemented in a highly-pressurised environment. While the shutdown is temporary, many of the solutions being imagined now will have long-term effects and may over time become permanent features of the delivery of higher education. Regardless, these decisions have an immediate impact on students and staff in the present.

This means that embedding the student voice within processes is perhaps more crucially important than ever before. Embedding student engagement and partnership in meaningful, yet realistic, ways in decision-making during this period will ensure longer-term confidence among students, as well as staff, as higher education continues to adapt.

Section 3: Staff-Student Committees and Formalising Engagement

It should be considered good practice in academic representation that every student who legitimately takes up a representative role should have access to formal, semi-formal, and informal mechanisms of feedback, communication and engagement. Without inter-connected engagement opportunities, it will hamper the capability of staff and students to work together, understand one another, to respond effectively to challenges, and to set agreed priorities. Understanding power imbalances, being able to navigate institutional structures and policies, as well as opportunities to build capacity and develop practice, are required to support staff and students in their engagement, ultimately underpinning active partnership.

The most formal opportunity for student representatives to fulfil their roles in Irish higher education institutions are Programme Boards/Committees. Other less formal, or semi-formal forums, can include Staff-Student Forums or Staff-Student Liaison Committees which are referred to in this publication series more broadly as Staff-Student Committees or SSCs. However, these SSCs can be fully formalised within institutional governance also, recognising their different remits to those of Programme Committees. Without these formal mechanisms it is inherently more difficult to capture and understand informal communication, engagement and feedback.

For a full exploration of a range of formal, semi-formal and informal mechanisms for student engagement within Irish higher education please see the Student Feedback Opportunities, Data and Follow-Up Report (2020) at studentengagement.ie/resources.

Section 4: Institution-Wide Strategies for Student Engagement

Figure 4 indicates some of the interconnection between the various levels of decision-making within an institution. Understanding the role of the four domains of student engagement, especially student representation across these levels is core to maintaining the student voice during the Covid-19 shutdown of face-to-face activity. Situating the Programme Committee and/or SSC within this model is crucial for connecting the student body with wider institutional policy and decision-making, identifiably establishing their voice within processes and outcomes.



Figure 4 - Student engagement across levels of institutional decision-making

Taking institution-wide approaches that allow for flexibility is crucial to ensuring a thorough understanding of student engagement across the range of programmes, departments and professional support units. Not only is this particularly important during the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, but will also provide opportunities to embed longer-term cultures of engagement and partnership that have been shaped by that response. Some key considerations for student engagement at each level and how they might be operationalised through Programme Committees and/or SSCs are detailed from sections 4.1 to 4.5 below.

4.1: Module-Level Engagement

All Class Reps should be able to inform decision-making at a modular level as this is the most prevalent opportunity for engagement with the wider student body, especially in teaching delivery, maintaining open door policies, academic and learning support, advice on procedures, and when considering assessment practices.

The modular level will also involve student engagement that is much less likely to be captured, especially one-to-one staff-student engagement in areas like academic support and pastoral care, including advice and signposting on wellbeing. During Covid-19 many students and staff will be interacting on matters that are highly personal and sensitive as uncertainty, disruption, isolation, and issues of accessibility, as well as the ill health of staff, students, families and the wider community take their toll on the teaching and learning environment.

Module-level student engagement tips:

- Consider ways in which the role of staff in one-to-one student engagement can be captured. Their experiences at the moment will be invaluable in understanding the scale and types of issues particular cohorts, or indeed the entire student body, is struggling with.
- Traditional student feedback, both staff-to-student (individual assessment feedback etc.) and student-to-staff (teaching and learning delivery, module evaluation, surveys, etc.) most often happen at the modular level. Are there ways in which these processes can be quickly adapted and streamlined to target issues specifically arising from the Covid-19 scenario?

4.2: Programme-Level Committees and Boards

Programme Boards and Committees are core to staff-student collaboration on teaching, learning, and quality matters, however these structures are not uniform from institution to institution, and even within institutions themselves. There are a variety of factors for this lack of uniformity ranging from institutional policy, disciplinary differences, and the cultures and practices within individual programmes or departments. The nature of what is discussed on the agendas of these committees will also vary depending on the time of year, internal and external quality arrangements, as well as prevailing programmatic or institutional reforms.

It is important to note that different approaches to Programme Committees are most often a positive reflection of tried and tested practices, as well as carefully fostered cultures of engagement between staff and students. While these committees serve important purposes within a programmatic and disciplinary context, there is also a crucial and substantial need for these committees to be interconnected to institutional governance and policy as part of wider efforts to embed meaningful student engagement in decision-making at all levels. This has particular implications for student engagement during Covid-19.

As the primary opportunity for students to engage in governance, it is pertinent to situate the role of programme-level committees as a driving force for effective student participation in decision-making as well as communication practices during the Covid-19 shutdown of higher education.

Module-level student engagement tips for Programme Committees and SSCs:

- It is important for Programme Chairs and Coordinators to consider the link between effective communication on programme-level matters and wider institutional strategy. Programme-level decisions will be informed by these wider concerns and student representatives will be reliant on effective communication at this level if they have no role beyond their own programme.
- Programme Committees will only involve perhaps 2 or 3 Class Reps depending on policies and terms of references, which may frustrate effective communication if programmes have dozens of Reps. Active consideration of how to mitigate these challenges and facilitate wider engagement, including supporting the few Reps on the committee, is pivotal.
- It is important for Programme Committees to go ahead to protect the role of student representation within formal governance and quality assurance, but it may also be possible to organise an ad hoc Staff-Student Committee or Forum (SSC) with departmental support to facilitate wider engagement with Reps and consider larger challenges.

Read the NStEP Quick Guides on Effective Staff-Student Committees and on Hosting Online Staff-Student Committees for further tips on formal student engagement at a programme-level.

4.3: Department-Level Coordination

At the Departmental level, including Schools and Faculties, there might not always be dedicated student academic representatives that are elected to consider wider issues across the programmes or units within that department. Where these structures are already in place, they may still be bedding down and require further development that can support students who take up such complex and challenging roles.

These challenges are often resolved through informal mechanisms, ad hoc representative arrangements, or by inviting Class Reps to take part in particular policy considerations. Many of these practices may now be considered impractical in an online and fast-moving reality, but there are some key steps that can be taken.

Department-level student engagement tips:

- Liaison between departmental senior management and students' unions (where they exist) is important in understanding the impact of wider institutional decision-making on students within a given department. Sabbatical Officers will be operating largely at the institutional level, while Class Reps will be operating at the programme level, therefore bridging the gap is an important objective.
- Coordinating cross-institutional and cross-departmental communication, responses, and initiatives and feeding these issues to Programme Committees will be crucial to filling any student engagement vacuum.
- Collating minutes, feedback, and thematic issues from across programmes is a vital opportunity in identifying student engagement practice, understanding where students may not be involved or participating, and being able to effectively troubleshoot student concerns.
- While detailed analysis of collated minutes or themes may not be possible at the moment, attention to recording and collecting such information will be very useful during the inevitable opportunities to reflect on the changes made and on student engagement practices during the shutdown.
- Departments may be able to support new opportunities for formal student engagement, such as hosting Department-wide SSCs.

Read the NStEP Quick Guides on Effective Staff-Student Committees and on Hosting Online Staff-Student Committees for further tips on formal student engagement at a department or programme-level.

4.4: Professional Support Services and Units

Professional support services, including libraries, academic and wellbeing services, and fees and registration, do not benefit from partnership with a defined group of student representatives in the same way that a programme or department might. This has presented a challenge for these support units for many years, and will continue to do so, but it does mean that it may benefit these units now to integrate with new emerging practices in the institution.

Student engagement tips for professional support services:

- Coordinate short reports or discussion points on issues that are particularly pressing as agenda items for Programme Committees or SSCs, as well as for relevant institutional committees, ensuring that professional support services are clearly included in student engagement discussions.
- Coordinate with students' unions, senior leaders, Heads of Departments and Programme Chairs to identify possible ways in which communication could be strengthened with students. Make sure to include discussion about accessing and utilising support services on meeting agendas at SSCs.
- Class Reps could be recruited and incentivised to act as liaison reps between students and services in a particular department or programme. These students could support working groups and information sharing, as well as more detailed engagement. However, always be mindful of student workload.

4.5: Institution-Wide Policy and Decision-Making

The need to protect the wellbeing and success of all students has never been more urgent as it is now during the Covid-19 pandemic, with agreed institution-wide approaches to student engagement pivotal in meeting that daily challenge. The importance of maintaining and strengthening effective student engagement practices during Covid-19 is not only a reflection of the core nature of student voice to success in higher education delivery and governance, but also on its necessity as core to understanding and responding to students during an extremely difficult time, both academically and personally.

Tips for institution-wide student engagement strategies during Covid-19:

- Institutional and student leadership will both benefit from an institution-wide approach to student engagement, communication, and feedback during the pandemic. The utilisation of existing structures like Programme Committees and academic representation (Class Reps etc.) cannot be understated, but these structures will require some shared sense of direction, and wherever possible should take common approaches.
- Coordination of institutional, departmental or programme level SSCs may assist in closing down vacuums where student representation has been traditionally difficult to maintain, and will provide an opportunity to strengthen staff-student relationships and collaboration at a time when people feel isolated and siloed.
- During a time of deep crisis and upheaval both students and staff are frustrated, but they are also very accommodating of one another. Partnership can sometimes seem to be a challenge for a sunny day, but ultimately building partnership is most important when it is raining. Mechanisms that institutions create or adapt now could be viewed as capacity building, rather than temporary.
- Putting in place clear lines of reporting and communication to gather a birds-eye view of concerns and themes from existing and ad hoc structures is extremely important in ensuring that student engagement and student voice is prevalent on agendas at the top of institutional governance structures.
- Coordinating with professional support services and units in order to communicate key issues across student representatives, and crucially to seek their engagement in change processes will create a sense of

partnership and mutual understanding.

- Where decisions are taken in governance settings that cannot be communicated widely for confidentiality or commercial reasons it is important to recognise that student leaders or staff in a variety of positions may be left in an information vacuum, where they can neither effectively resolve the issue faced by students or inform those students why a particular decision has been taken. This will inevitably place a workload and an accountability pressure on those individuals, and will lead to issues further down the line when the Covid-19 crisis has ended.
- Committees within the institution will often have to handle personal and sensitive matters that require confidentiality for the students and staff involved, especially at a time when students are facing untold hardships and staff are under immense pressure. If these matters are precluding student representatives from meetings then institutional guidance may be appropriate for alternative means of engagement. While confidentiality is of utmost importance it is also important to delineate decision-making in these matters from processes of quality assurance and enhancement where student engagement should remain a core feature.



National Student Engagement Programme

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