

QUICK GUIDE FOR EFFECTIVE STAFF-STUDENT COMMITTEES

Supporting Student Engagement during the Covid-19 Crisis

This Quick Guide is part of a series of resources published by the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) to support formal student engagement practices during the shutdown of face-to-face activity in Irish higher education as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This particular Quick Guide outlines the key areas for consideration when developing and formalising staff-student meetings, modeled on Staff-Student Committees (SSCs). This resource may be useful for Committee Chairpersons, Programme Chairs, those working in quality assurance and governance matters, and for student representatives. The guidance outlined could inform terms of references, supporting and enabling policies, developing a culture of meaningful engagement, and embedding formal student engagement across institutional governance.

Adapting to an online setting will require some careful consideration, but largely this will be influenced by the culture of the committee and by the sense of mutual collaboration that is created and fostered. Further guidance on hosting and attending SSCs in an online setting is detailed in the NStEP Quick Guide on Hosting Online Staff-Student Committees. Please also see the Insight Report on Institutional Approaches to Student Engagement during Covid-19 which details on these committees can play an integral role in maintaining and strengthening student engagement.

ROLE AND FUNCTION OF AN SSC

- Work closely with students to set out the principles and ethos of your staff-student committees and forums, ensuring members feel part of the same mission and vision and recognise that they have a valued role within the institution.
- The role of the SSC should be set out clearly, with a considered balance on the need for the student voice to be raised and heard with an ethos of participatory engagement and partnership between staff and students.
- Avoid labelling the SSC as an opportunity simply for feedback or raising/responding to issues in order to ensure that informing and actioning change is not lost.
- Set out the role of the SSC within the four domains of student engagement - to enhance teaching and learning, to inform quality assurance, to provide a formal opportunity for student representation, and to play a key part in institutional governance.
- Consider the full student learning experience (SLE) and the responsibility that the SSC has to inform academic provision, curriculum, and resources.
- Informal discussion and engagement between staff and students should be encouraged in-between meetings to handle issues that can be easily resolved and to ensure that relationships are fostered outside of formal settings, advancing a culture of partnership within a department or programme.
- Lay out clearly how student representatives can raise more minor issues, such as room bookings or facilities, with key contact lists. However, this should not prevent the committee from looking at larger solutions to common problems.

MEMBERSHIP

- Where possible chairing responsibilities could be shared with staff and student co-chairs, and during break-out discussions, students may be able to facilitate. Sub-groups could also potentially be chaired and led by students.
- Co-chairs should meet in advance to discuss and agree the agenda for circulation, and after meetings should continue such meetings to consider action lists. Solutions are more easily identified and implemented with ongoing partnership.
- Elections and democratic practices for student representatives on the SSC should be clearly laid out in conjunction with students' union processes, while senior managers and the students' union can liaise on how best to support election processes to strengthen partnership in academic representation.
- Elected student representative roles should be mapped against formal committees and forums, ensuring all Reps have a 'seat at the table.'

- Postgraduate representative positions are more often vacant than positions at an undergraduate level. Solutions include the co-option of willing postgraduates to committees or hosting separate postgraduate meetings, with careful consideration of balance between taught and research.
- If less formal meetings are held for postgraduate students as a result of lack of formal representation, consider ways in which the feedback from these groups can be included in formal reporting.
- The balance between staff-student membership versus actual attendance can be difficult to achieve, however aiming for a 40/60 staff/student ratio with a sizable membership should be manageable. This ratio can mitigate power imbalances, while also committing a significant number of staff to engaging with the SS. (Other ratios are entirely feasible too, depending on a range of factors.)
- For staff membership it is important to consider the inclusion of a range of roles and responsibilities, as well as ensure there are staff who can effectively handle issues from across a programme or department.
- Appropriate seniority should be included in the membership, ensuring that some level of response to particular issues can be provided in the committee setting.

CONDUCTING MEETINGS

- Meeting frequency should support meaningful engagement that involves student representatives within processes of change. Infrequent meetings can create an environment that focuses on 'checking in' and information sharing, providing less chance for capacity building and expanding the role of students.
- Timing of the meetings should be agreed cross-departmentally, depending on the nature of the committee, and should be set in liaison between staff and students.
- Short meetings should be avoided so that the role of the SSC is perceived to be valuable and valued, and ensures that no one feels under pressure not to raise points for fear of being responsible for the meeting running over time.
- Action lists should be recorded with responsibilities assigned. Opportunities to collaborate between staff and students in between meetings could be identified in order to achieve actions.

REPORTING AND IMPACT

- The role of the SSC within the wider institution can be set out through the ways in which the minutes or themes from the group are reported. For example, an SSC could report departmentally and/or centrally, as well as to the students' union executive. However, it is best to put in place clear mechanisms for collating reports from across the institution.
- A short governance or committee mapping exercise would assist both students and staff to understand the impact that SSCs can have within institutional decision making. This need only be a simple diagram of how student-staff forums interact with governance arrangements.
- Minutes should be agreed with the student co-chair (if there is one) ensuring that students are afforded a full role in follow-up and actions.
- Identifying ways in which professional support units can be involved in these committees will strengthen the student voice in their work and build mutual understanding between departments. While support units may not be able to participate in all meetings, they may be able to provide short updates and reports.
- Communication across campus and within the virtual learning environment is crucial for feedback to students, as well as ensuring transparency. The ways in which this communication is achieved will be institution and department-specific, but it is important to maintain communication before and after meetings. If putting updates on a VLE it is best to ensure it takes a minimum number of 'clicks' to find them.
- New roles for students and staff could be identified from agendas and discussions, such as student representatives appointed to liaise with particular support services like the library or student registry.

SUPPORT

- Training for student representatives could be a mixture of students' union and departmental training, reflecting the varying roles that these representatives play. NStEP remains a source of training year-round and could accommodate particular needs. Just get in touch!
- Pre-meetings for students could be arranged by academic representatives and led by student co-chairs. This will allow students to raise issues and discuss matters outside of the formal setting, giving them an opportunity to explore matters as well as build their confidence and understanding.

- Considering the role of the students' union, quality office, teaching and learning units and other central services is important from the outset.
- Transition and continuity between student representatives and new staff members is often a barrier to successfully managing issues and change from one academic year to the next. Hold transitional meetings, write quick reports or handbooks, and when tackling a particular project try to set a clear goal for the end of the academic year to avoid it rolling-over into a new Rep term.

PERSONAL AND SENSITIVE MATTERS

- Confidentiality on matters pertaining to individual persons must be maintained, so set this out as a core principle for any committee at the beginning.
- Matters of student progression and human resources are often discussed at Programme Committees/Boards particularly. It may be more pertinent to discuss these in a separate meeting after the full meeting ends. Asking students to arrive later or to leave early, if poorly managed, can create a perception of hierarchy and lack of trust. Assess whether it is entirely necessary to discuss these issues at the same meeting and whether they could be handled at another opportunity.

