

The Path to a New National Approach to Student Engagement in Decision-Making

*Discussion Paper for
Students and Staff across
Irish Higher Education*

November 2020



**National Student
Engagement Programme**

Clár Rannpháirtíochta Náisiúnta
na Mac Léinn

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ABOUT NStEP

The National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) was launched in April 2016 by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI).

NStEP aims to strengthen student engagement in decision-making across Irish higher education, supported by the current 'conceptual framework' for student engagement, published by the Higher Education Authority in 2016. The Programme seeks to champion a strong culture of partnership between students and staff through practice-based projects, training and capacity building, as well as informing policy developments.

In 2019 NStEP launched a new Strategy that reflected on the achievements of the programme since it was launched in 2016, as well as setting out an ambitious plan to embed and enhance student engagement practices across the higher education sector.

To achieve the aspirations of both students and staff, the strategy sets out three strategic priorities for 2019 – 2021, which are:

- Strengthening the value of student engagement nationally
- Developing the leadership capabilities of students in Irish higher education
- Supporting staff and students across the sector to foster a culture of partnership

Our Vision

To inform, guide and support an Irish higher education landscape that fosters student engagement and the building of meaningful staff-student partnerships within and beyond institutions.

Our Mission

To ensure value is placed on student engagement in Irish higher education through the development of the leadership capabilities of students and by supporting institutions and their staff to foster a culture of partnership with students.



WHY HAVE WE PRODUCED THIS DISCUSSION PAPER?

This discussion paper outlines key revisions to the 'conceptual framework' for student engagement in decision-making. NStEP has been tasked with maintaining, and now revisiting, this crucial framework for enhancing student engagement throughout higher education governance, teaching and learning, quality assurance, and student representation.

NStEP, supported by a project team of students and staff, has been busy exploring a new version of the framework during 2020. It was decided to revise the framework after feedback during our 2019 strategy consultation that informed us that the current framework is often difficult to apply to the day-to-day experiences of both staff and students. Student engagement practices and approaches have evolved and changed over time, and with it, the framework must evolve to reflect those changes.

WHO IS THIS DISCUSSION PAPER FOR?

This discussion paper is for all students and staff in higher education institutions in Ireland, regardless of your role or previous experiences. NStEP seeks to improve the opportunities of all staff and students to work together, not only those in leadership or representative roles.

WHAT CHANGES ARE WE PROPOSING TO THE FRAMEWORK?

The key changes that the NStEP Project Team for revising the framework have so far discussed are as follows:

- Short statements that set out the NStEP understanding of the concepts of student voice, **student engagement** and **student partnership**.
- A revised set of **drivers of student engagement** – four in total – and crucially the inclusion of 'students as partners' as a driver, rather than a principle.
- A revised set of **domains of student engagement** – four in total – and the accompanying statements on how these domains relate to student engagement.
- A revised set of **principles of student engagement** – five in total, down from ten – based on feedback and ideas we have received from students and staff since March 2020.
- The Project Team has also decided that it is crucial to add the **enablers of student engagement**, so that the framework can be used practically by staff and students.

WHAT EVIDENCE DID WE USE TO INFORM THE NEW DRAFT FRAMEWORK?

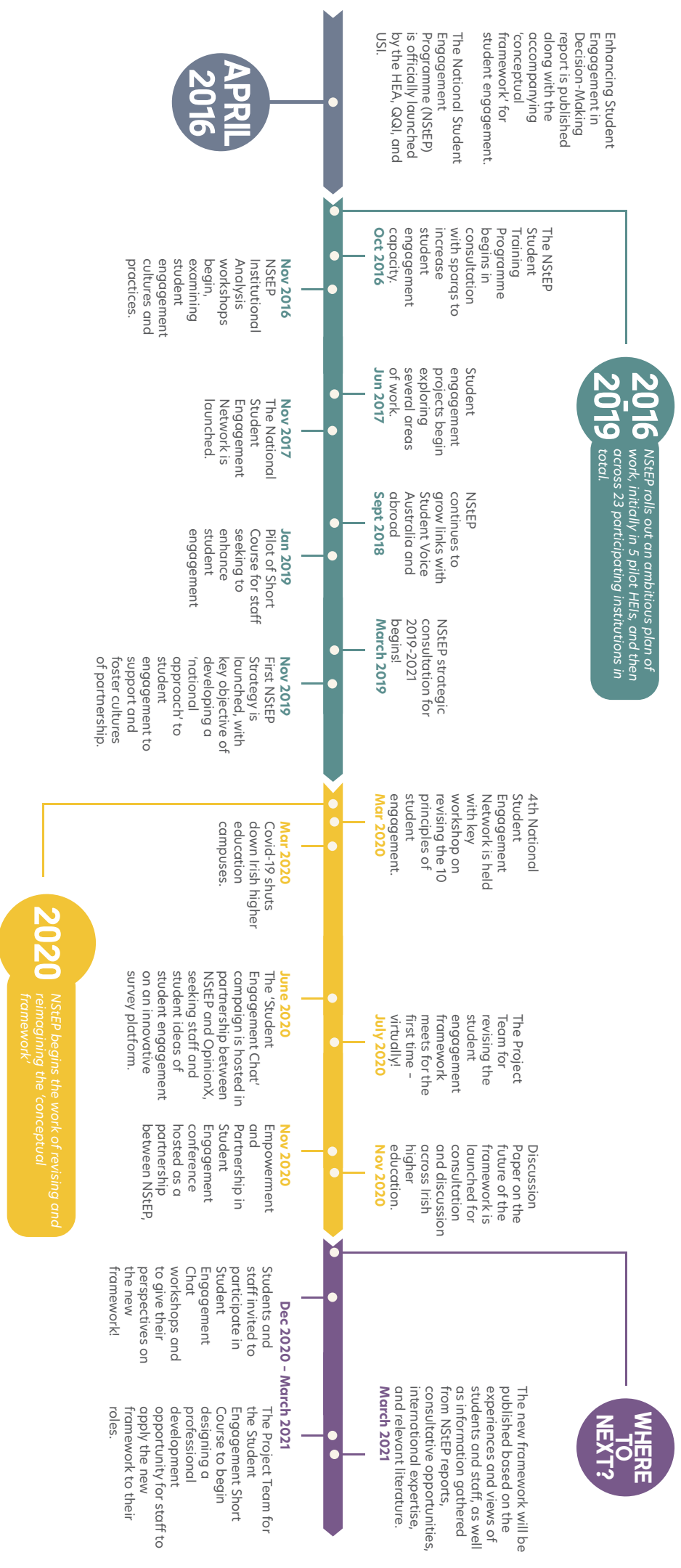
NStEP has an active network of students and staff, which began the process of reviewing the framework at our 4th National Student Engagement Network in March 2020. Since then, we have involved students and staff in a national 'Student Engagement Chat' campaign, in partnership with OpinionX. Subsequently, an NStEP Project Team of over 20 students and staff came together to discuss views from across the sector. In addition, we have drawn upon a large body of literature from across global higher education and have undertaken an exploration of the outcomes of the 16 Institutional Analysis workshops carried out by NStEP between 2016 and 2019.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

NStEP intends to publish the new framework for student engagement in decision-making in March 2021, after a period of discussion and consultation on the contents of this discussion paper starting in late November 2020. This will be published alongside a more detailed overview of the academic literature on student engagement and partnership from across the globe that has influenced our deliberations. The Project Team will consider what additional resources may be helpful for students and staff to successfully use the new framework to collaborate in their own contexts and on the issues that matter to them.

The path to a new framework for student engagement in Irish higher education.

HOW DID WE GET HERE, AND WHERE TO NEXT?



THE CURRENT 'CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK': WHAT DOES IT SAY?

The Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision-Making report, published by the Higher Education Authority in 2016, was the culmination of the coming together of a range of national bodies, institutional representation, and students' unions to shape a common approach to student engagement. The National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) was launched by the HEA, QQI, and USI on the same day that the report was formally published.

The report recommended that institutions develop strategies for student engagement, guided by a 'conceptual framework.' This framework set out a values-based approach, rather than define an action-based roadmap for institutions. However, it did recognise that 'student engagement is also dependent on institutional conditions, policies, and culture that enable and encourage students to get further involved.' (p. vii) The report provided a seminal understanding for Irish higher education, setting out the two competing models of 'student as consumer' and student as partner,' with one the antithesis of the other. Ultimately, the debate around these two models is not only about the role of students, but 'is a fundamental one for the direction of the higher education system' itself (p.4).

'An underpinning culture of participatory governance which recognises the uniqueness of the higher education institution would aim to ensure that all members of that community are actively engaged in shaping that community. The driver of the HEI as a democratic entity is, therefore, wider than student engagement solely. It also relates to staff engagement, and the involvement of staff and students in decision-making processes.' (HEA report, 2016)

The model of development that the report proposed underlined the need for Irish higher education institutions to embrace a culture of participative democracy, defined by self-critique, that can ultimately foster a collective learning community, inclusive of all students and staff, who can work together to enhance the experiences of all. To realise this vision, student engagement must be examined, and good practice embedded across all levels of higher education, from the programme to the national level, underpinned by 10 principles.

These principles were as follows:

1. Democracy
2. Student as partner
3. Inclusivity and Diversity
4. Transparency
5. Students as co-creators
6. Collegiality and parity of esteem
7. Professionalism and support
8. Feedback and feedback loop
9. Self-criticism and enhancement
10. Consistency of values

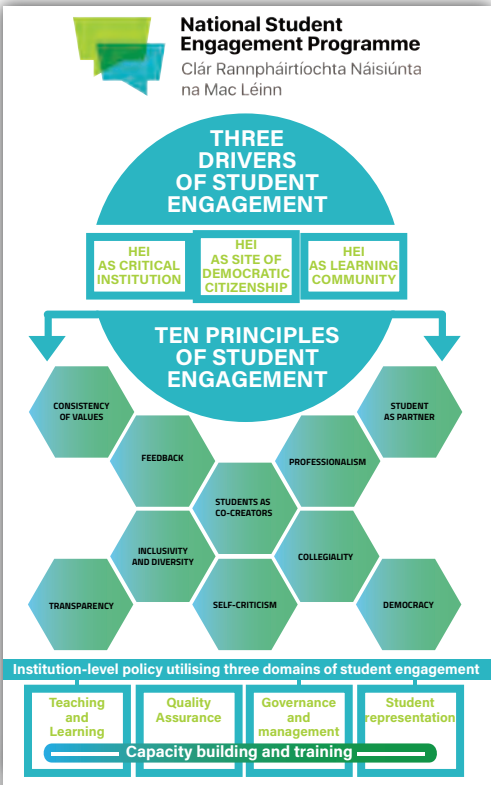
The report recommended that institutions set out to self-evaluate student engagement practices at all levels, led by both students and staff, co-authoring student engagement policies that interact across three domains of governance and management, quality assurance, and teaching and learning. The report, drawing on evidence that demonstrated the desire of students to be treated as partners (Bunce et al, 2016, cited in HEA, 2016, p.5), strongly recommended that institutional



culture that was rooted in the ethos and practice of student partnership was the means to successful and meaningful student engagement. Importantly, the report set out a national approach that recognises that realising student partnership is key to the civic mission of higher education in a democratic society, with consumerist and marketized approach to students as antithesis to that public contribution.

‘A partnership implies an equal relationship between two or more bodies working together towards a common purpose and respecting the different skills, knowledge, experience and capability that each party brings to the table.’ (European Students’ Union, 2015)

Capacity building and training opportunities for students and staff across higher education, improving shared knowledge and expertise, and developing a ‘radical collegiality’ (Fielding, 1999) can lead to a relationship of empowered co-creation, which is ‘in fact an integral, existential, part of higher education.’ (p.11)



NSTEP’S RELATIONSHIP TO THE FRAMEWORK

The ‘conceptual framework’ and accompanying report have been foundational documents for the approach taken by NStEP since it was launched. The only change that has been made since that time is to add student representation as a fourth domain, primarily in recognition of the fact that both the report and work undertaken since then has hinged on our ability to support student representatives and students’ unions.

NStEP has worked to facilitate and grow a National Student Engagement Network (NSEN) since 2017, bringing together students and staff from across disciplines, roles, and responsibilities. Often identified was the need to support students and staff across Irish higher education institutions to understand, interpret and implement the ‘conceptual framework’ into their work. As part of NStEP’s strategic planning in early 2019 this need was identified strongly, including the need to define the concepts of student engagement and partnership. Core to the subsequent NStEP Strategy 2019-2021 is to set out a ‘national approach’ to student engagement – this means re-imagining and revising the framework so that it can be understood in a more practical sense.

On 9th March 2020, NStEP began the work to revise the framework in earnest, hosting a collaborative workshop at the 4th National Student Engagement Network in IT Carlow. Key milestones have been achieved in this project since then, including the launch of the ‘Student Engagement Chat’ campaign on the online platform OpinionX, and the constitution of the national Project Team tasked by the NStEP Steering Committee to complete the work of revision of the framework. A range of sources have been used to develop the new version of the framework, including the outcomes of the 16 institutional analysis workshops across higher education institutions.

REVISING THE FRAMEWORK: WHAT DO WE MEAN BY STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN DECISION-MAKING?

There are many understandings of student engagement, as well as related phrases and concepts like 'student voice' and 'students as partners.' Often these phrases are used interchangeably, even though there are rarely agreed definitions, or even agreement on when they should be used and how. In truth, 'we could define student engagement in any way we want' (Finn and Zimmer, 2012) and each of these many understandings are entirely legitimate. For example, student engagement can be perceived as students engaging in their own learning and in the life of their institution, while others will perceive student engagement as staff engaging with students (Bryson and Furlonger, 2018) – effectively, engagement may be viewed differently depending on where you are standing. In truth, it is both of these things and much more. As a result, without an agreed sense of why we use these phrases it is difficult to act in a coordinated way when we talk about student engagement.

Ultimately, student engagement is a process through which students and staff can develop a relationship that is open, honest, and can lead to collaboration. It allows staff to work with their students as part of the learning environment, to seek their feedback and input, and to build their sense of belonging and connection to their institution. Student engagement should have student-centred outcomes, but also staff-centric benefit (Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2017). It is a mutually important process.

Student engagement is not confined to any one part of the institution. It isn't just a learning or classroom-based issue. It shouldn't simply be perceived as students sitting on committees or influencing institutional governance. It isn't just about feedback processes, nor should it be seen as an activity that only some students or some staff are involved in. Seeking to improve student engagement shouldn't only happen through specific projects but be considered as part of both curricular and extra-curricular approaches (Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2017).

It is also vitally important to consider whether student engagement approaches are being designed by staff, rather than with students (Matthews, 2016). With this in mind, 'All partnership is student engagement, but not all student engagement is partnership.' (Healey et al, 2014) This does not mean that engagement processes or activities that don't directly involve students as partners are not worthwhile, but it does require staff and students to actively consider the way in which decision-making works in their institution.

Partnership denotes an engagement that is shared or equal (Felten, Bovill, and Cook-Sather, 2014), that provides co-ownership, and that creates space to actively work together, but not all students will take up those opportunities and staff may face limitations like workload and time. This requires us to explore why these limitations exist and to reconsider how engagement and partnership can be inclusive.

How we perceive student engagement depends on where it is that we are discussing it. Engagement can and should happen at all levels of higher education. The issues and the means of engagement will be both different and the same at each level, but the roles and responsibilities of each individual will differ from the module level, to the programme level, to departments and faculties, and ultimately up to the institutional level.

CLARIFYING THE CORE CONCEPTS

A key part of developing the new framework was revisiting what we mean by student engagement and related concepts. Until now, we have not set out our own national definitions in Irish higher education, so NStEP has sought to set out how we see student voice, student engagement, and student partnership. We have not sought to define each concept, rather we have taken the approach of clarifying our understanding of them, as follows:

Student voice is the act of students sharing their individual and collective lived experiences, expressed through views and perspectives, demonstrated by formal and informal conversation, debate, feedback, and ultimately, active listening and being heard.

Student engagement is a process by which students and staff seek to work together to shape decision-making in higher education, building individual and collective capacity and knowledge to navigate institutional structures and cultures.

Student partnership is the practice that both drives forward and emerges from meaningful student engagement, which recognises the need to re-balance power dynamics in higher education and seeks to enable a culture of change through collaboration, reciprocity and shared responsibility between staff and students.

Considered together, with varied opportunities for both students and staff, student engagement is the process through which the student voice is heard, understood, and amplified, while student partnership builds a sense of collaboration through that engagement process, which can ultimately redefine traditional hierarchies in higher education for the benefit of all. This process of student engagement requires commonly understood approaches. The new NStEP framework seeks to set out a national approach for all students and staff, supported by their institutions, to realise an engaged partnership with one another.

REIMAGINING THE FRAMEWORK FOR THE BENEFIT OF ALL STUDENTS AND STAFF

From 'conceptual' to 'practical' to lived reality?

The NStEP Project Team tasked with revision of the 'conceptual framework' set out to ensure that the framework could be more universally understood by students and staff in all corners of higher education. How could we make it more recognisable? How could the principles become more memorable and easily understood in any context? How could we ensure the framework offered practical advice, while remaining applicable to all institutions?

The Project Team proposes a revised set of **drivers**, **domains**, and **principles**, while adding a new section on **enablers**. Each of these sections is developed further, except for the section on enablers. Expanding our understanding of the enablers of student engagement will form a key part of consultation and discourse with students and staff across the sector before the framework is published in March 2021.

The Concepts

The **four drivers** can be considered the cultural bedrock upon which any institution should seek to build authentic approaches to student engagement. The **four domains** are the powerhouses which act on these cultures and seek to sustainably embed processes and practices. The **five principles** are the means through which both individual and collective engagement is fostered, developing partnerships. The **five enablers** are the ways in which the institution as a whole and those working through the four domains, seek to enact practical, pragmatic, and ambitious approaches.

4 DRIVERS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

A CULTURE OF
INSTITUTIONAL
CRITIQUE AND
EVALUATION

THE
INSTITUTION
AS A SITE OF
DEMOCRATIC
CITIZENSHIP

THE
INSTITUTION AS
AN INCLUSIVE
LEARNING
COMMUNITY

A CULTURE OF
STUDENTS AS
PARTNERS

4 DOMAINS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

GOVERNANCE
AND
MANAGEMENT

TEACHING
AND LEARNING

QUALITY
ASSURANCE
AND
ENHANCEMENT

STUDENT
REPRESENTATION
AND
ORGANISATION

5 PRINCIPLES OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

DIALOGUE

BUILDING
TRUST

EQUITY AND
INCLUSIVITY

EMPOWERMENT

STUDENTS AS
CO-CREATORS

5 ENABLERS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

CAPACITY
BUILDING

INSTITUTIONAL
APPROACHES

SUPPORTIVE
POLICIES AND
PROCESSES

INNOVATIVE
PRACTICES

SUSTAINABILITY

THE 4 DRIVERS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

A culture of institutional critique and evaluation

For student engagement processes and partnership practices to succeed, institutions should champion a culture that is underpinned by enhancement and critique, where uncomfortable conversations are valued, and ideas willingly explored. Student and staff collaborations are successful in an atmosphere of honest evaluation and open discourse. Partners should be able to work within processes, mechanisms, and systems that are authentically able to analyse practices and cultures.

The institution as a site of democratic citizenship

Higher education plays an important role in building and maintaining democratic culture and democratic institutions throughout society. By seeking to foster a sense of civic responsibility in students, higher education meets a cornerstone of its mission. Engaged partnership between students and staff can be realised through the values of democracy, citizenship, and participation.

The institution as an inclusive learning community

Student engagement thrives in an institution that fosters a culture where all staff and students are perceived as part of a learning community, where each individual and group can contribute to the development of shared knowledge and innovations. In this sense, each member of the community has a set of unique, collective, and interconnected roles and responsibilities, and should be able to contribute throughout their own higher education journey. A sustainable community of practice is one that assists everyone to make the most of that journey, helping each member to realise the potential of their expertise and ideas. Fundamentally, the community thrives when practices are nurtured for the benefit of the whole community.

A culture of students as partners

Institutions aim to embed a shared meaning and recognition of student partnership as a cultural aspiration for all students and staff. Supporting students as partners creates a congenial and collaborative environment, where the opportunity to participate and influence enhances the ability of all to navigate decision-making processes and develop a sense of responsibility. Shared goals are nurtured in an environment that recognises student engagement as proactive, rather than passive. A culture of partnership supports a developmental model of citizenship, that motivates partners to engage in activities that enhance their own learning journey, as well as the collective experiences.



THE 4 DOMAINS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Governance and management

Student engagement in governance and management of higher education institutions is often viewed through the lens of involvement in committees, however, to enhance engagement and foster a culture of partnership, space for broader understanding is needed. Recognition of pre-existing hierarchies, decision-making cultures, and knowledge or information asymmetry is crucial to ensuring that students can fully participate and influence processes of policy development, implementation, and evaluation that are student-centred. It is from the governance domain that student engagement can be embedded throughout all institutional decision-making, projects, and policy developments.

Teaching and Learning

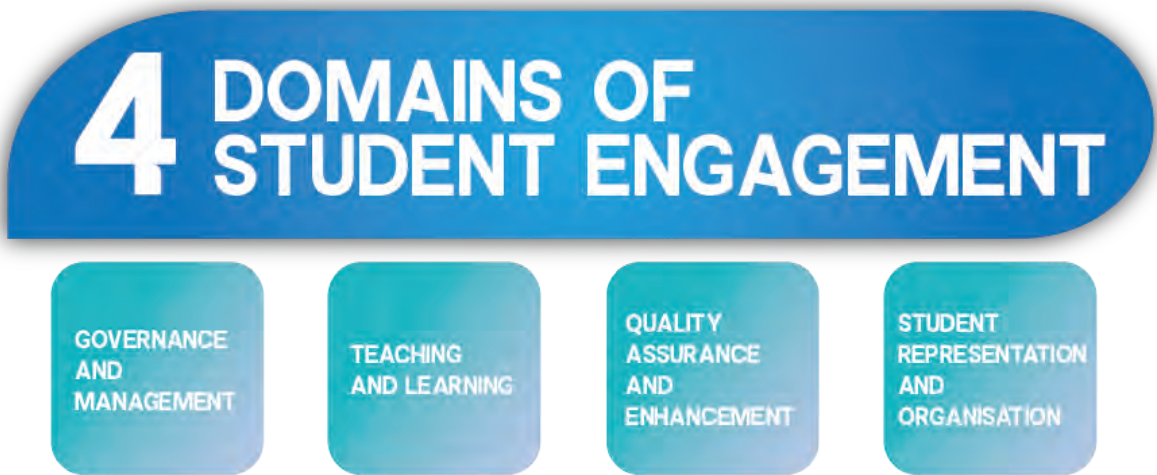
The environment of teaching, learning and assessment is where students and staff will most often engage. Approaches to student engagement should seek to find balance between student engagement in their own learning and student engagement in the process of enhancing that learning. Partnership in this space can be pedagogical, curricular, and extra-curricular, founded on strong dialogic relationships, where staff and students recognise that their engagement can have wider influence in institutional change, emerging good practice, and quality assurance.

Quality Assurance and Enhancement

Student engagement in both quality assurance and quality enhancement should not only be rooted in student participation throughout all processes, but the process itself needs be able to effectively capture and understand the ways in which student engagement is meaningfully supported and realised through practice. Quality assurance that has student engagement principles systematically embedded can ensure greater responsivity to the needs and aspirations of all students, as well as scaffolding that staff require to turn partnership in to lived reality.

Student Representation and Organisation

Student-to-student engagement is an important element of an inclusive and collaborative system of partnership. The ability of all students to participate in democratic processes and elect their own representatives, coupled with the ability of students to self-organise, debate and discuss, to develop student-led opportunities, and to support one another throughout their learning journey, is core to enhancing capabilities to become change agents. The existence of effective systems of student organisation allows space for disagreement and dissent, while nurturing spaces that build consensus and the discovery of mutual goals.



THE 5 PRINCIPLES OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Dialogue

Engagement that can meaningfully lead to partnership between students and staff requires a dialogic approach, open and transparent relationships, the nurturing of connections, and the development of a sense of belonging. Dialogue denotes communication that is multi-directional and responsive to concerns and ideas, underpinned by recognised processes of providing feedback and taking actions that close the feedback loop. Authentic debate and discourse thrive in an environment where the outcomes of that discourse are valued and actionable, where opinions and experiences are treated with legitimacy, and expectations are discussed openly. Reciprocity and cultural values are defined in tandem to avoid the imposition of traditions.

Building Trust

For students and staff to develop engagement and partnership with one-another, the existence of relationships of trust is crucial. Transparency in processes, a willingness to share information, communication that is multi-directional, and honest dialogue are core to building practices that can support sustainable partnerships. Nurturing constructive and collegial relationships requires space to generate a deeper understanding of both shared and competing goals. Providing clarity and clear rationale is crucial to creating an environment where solutions are not always easily identifiable and allows partners to address issues of power imbalance. Navigating challenges, seeking compromises, and building consensus necessitates mutual respect, accountability, empathy, and ethics. A sense of trust shapes spaces for cooperation, as well as shared roles and responsibilities.

Equity and Inclusivity

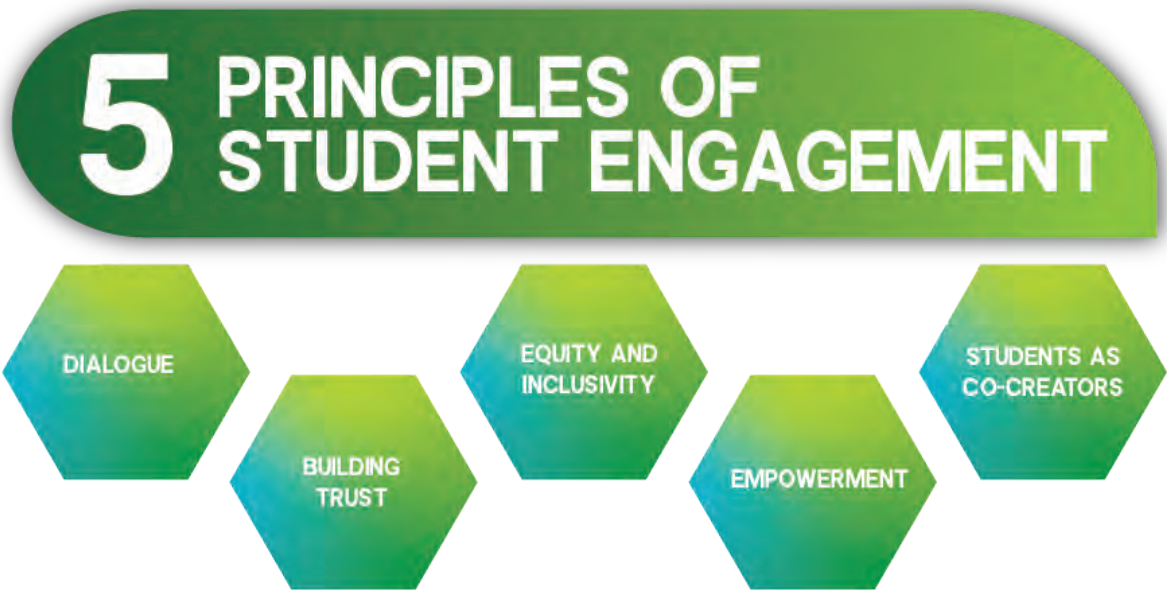
An increasingly diverse student and staff body requires diverse approaches to student engagement, underpinned by universality, inclusivity, and representation. Partnership recognises that the learning experience is shaped by the lived experiences of each individual engaged in higher education. Equitable processes can ensure that tokenistic approaches to diversity are avoided, underpinning a culture where engagement is accessible and attainable for all students and staff, and ultimately begin to address issues of exclusion or non-engagement. Building structures and processes that value understanding and visibility for lived experiences, strengthened by practices that create equity of access to opportunities for engagement, can ensure that institutional cultures are truly inclusive, supportive of equality of outcomes, and able to realise the development of all students and staff.

Empowerment

Empowerment in decision-making, both individually and collectively, is required for both students and staff to realise the full potential of engagement and partnership with one another. The recognition of inherent power imbalance and the impact of power dynamics is required to recognise meaningful pathways to build the capabilities of students and staff to work together to influence and inform change. Developing agency and self-efficacy through dialogue can allow for more inclusive spaces for both disagreement and consensus to exist more harmoniously. Parity of esteem, supported by empathetic mentoring and leadership development, generates the opportunity to overcome tokenistic approaches and afford all students and staff the chance to participate in a process that provides meaning and value to their input.

Students as co-creators

Partnership cannot exist without the co-creation and co-design of knowledge, actions, and outcomes, where engagement culture shifts from passivity to collaboration. Developing this culture elevates partnership from conceptual to tangible, where the role of students can be focused on both the process and the product of engagement. Co-creation develops a sense among both students and staff that their dialogue can lead to the co-development of solutions, underpinned by listening, understanding of the expertise of each individual, shared goals, and agency. Co-creation emerges from the ability of staff and students to be able to jointly navigate existing norms, practices, and assumptions, while allowing space to anticipate challenges and competing pressures. Developing this active agency, for both staff and students, can grow roots from small-scale initiatives at all levels of education, and is embedded by the gradual realisation of both confidence and potential.



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With special thanks to the NStEP Project Team for the Revision of the Student Engagement Framework:

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