



# STEPS TO PARTNERSHIP

A Framework for Authentic  
Student Engagement in  
Decision-Making



**National Student  
Engagement Programme**

Clár Rannpháirtíochta Náisiúnta  
na Mac Léinn



## Steps to Partnership

A Framework for Authentic Student Engagement  
in Decision-Making



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National Student Engagement Programme



National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP)



## National Student Engagement Programme

Clár Rannpháirtíochta Náisiúnta na Mac Léinn

In April 2016, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA), came together to launch the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) alongside the HEA report on *Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision-Making*. The conceptual framework within that report, including principles of student engagement at its core, provided a foundation to build the national effort to ensure students, staff, and institutions were supported to embed meaningful student participation across decision-making processes. Key to the success of NStEP since then has been its role in enabling engagement and partnership efforts between students and staff across the different levels of higher education.

*Steps to Partnership* is a culmination of the work that has taken place across Irish higher education since 2016 to enhance and embed authentic student engagement in decision-making. The development of this new framework has been a collaborative effort, learning from the diversity of initiative and ideas, challenges and successes, good practices, and aspirations, of students and staff across the sector.

It is hoped that the new definitions of student voice, student engagement, and student partnership in this framework can spark dialogue and creativity. Revised drivers and principles of student engagement are supported by an entirely new section on the enablers of student engagement, which may provide a basis for fostering sustainable partnerships. The domains of student engagement - governance and management, teaching and learning, quality assurance and enhancement, and student representation and organisation - are now at the heart of *Steps to Partnership*, recognising the important role that each domain plays in creating a democratic and inclusive culture of engagement.

*Steps to Partnership* demonstrates the evolution of student engagement in Ireland, setting out a framework to further improve it for the benefit of the entire learning community. NStEP will continue to support this effort on behalf of USI, QQI and the HEA. Ultimately, it has been the dedication and the commitment of students, staff, and institutions across Ireland that has made this new framework a reality.



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# Background to Steps to Partnership

This framework is the result of a national collaboration between students and staff from across Irish higher education that began in March 2020. The National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) has supported this collaboration, bringing together perspectives, experiences, and ideas, led by a national Project Team of students and staff from different backgrounds and roles.

Since the publication of the Higher Education Authority's *Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision-Making* report in 2016, Irish higher education has collectively looked to the important principles it laid out for the enhancement of student-staff engagement and the development of a partnership approach in higher education decision-making. Since then, NStEP has worked to put that vision in to action at the national level and across the sector. As perspectives and practices evolved in student engagement, there was an opportunity to set out a new framework to support its further evolution. Steps to Partnership is the result of that idea.

To find out more about how *Steps to Partnership* emerged from the earlier 2016 report, read the NStEP Discussion Paper on *The Path to a New National Approach to Student Engagement in Decision-Making* (2020). [Available here.](#)



## 'Students as partners'

Student engagement in decision-making is underpinned by a shared ethos in Ireland. That ethos was outlined in the Higher Education Authority's *Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision-Making* report, published in 2016.

The 2016 report set out clearly that students are partners in Irish higher education and should not be viewed as consumers. Partnership in decision-making shapes a participatory approach to the governance of higher education, which is achieved by ensuring all members of the learning community can engage in shaping the community they are a part of.

This framework seeks to build upon that important ethos.

“

**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)

# What is the benefit of the *Steps to Partnership* framework?

- This framework is owned by everyone in Irish higher education. It recognises Irish higher education, including future students and staff, as a learning community.
- This framework is promoted and supported by NStEP, a collaborative national partnership, that seeks to support students and staff in each institution to interpret it in the most suitable way for their own context and goals.
- This framework recognises that lots of incredibly good practice in student engagement is already happening across Irish higher education, so it is designed in way that can support the sharing of that practice for the benefit of others.
- This framework is rooted in the reality that creating and crafting shared goals and finding space to build stronger and sustainable partnerships is often difficult. By utilising this framework, we hope that new approaches and conversations can be initiated to help navigate these challenges.
- This framework does not seek to set out any definitive approach to student engagement, nor does it seek to set out a very particular roadmap. It has been created to provide a set of principles and ideas to foster dialogue and collaboration.
- This framework can support the emergence of more democratic and inclusive decision-making, creating a deeper sense of mutual understanding across the learning community.
- This framework is a living document, that will evolve over time, reflecting the experiences, challenges and successes of students and staff who seek to enhance student engagement and partnership.
- Ultimately, this framework is about ensuring that students are at the heart of decision-making that shapes their learning experience for the better.

## Using the *Steps to Partnership* framework in your institution

- Involve as broad an audience as possible from the very start, including students and staff with different roles and experiences.
- Promote the use of the framework across governance structures, during decision-making opportunities, and with people in decision-making positions.
- Seek ways to introduce the concepts of student engagement and student partnership across the institution to support your exploration of the framework.
- Actively communicate the work that is being undertaken and try to find new ways to involve others.
- Be open to change and to discovering new ways of shaping the learning environment.

# What is 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 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 at the institutional level.



## Just to note

### Engagement can mean many different things to many different people... does this framework exclude some perspectives and understandings?

There are many different views and perspectives on what constitutes 'engagement' in Irish higher education. Every day students engage in their learning, they engage with one another and with staff members, and they also engage with extra-curricular activities, civic society, support services, industry, research, and lots more.

When we refer to student engagement, we are primarily concerned with the active participation of students in decision-making processes. This is not solely the preserve of activities such as student representatives on committees or through students responding to surveys but should be about a greater aspiration to ensure students can play a meaningful part in influencing how decisions are made in higher education and how these decisions affect their learning experiences.

Effectively, it is about students taking up their rightful place as partners in the provision of higher education in Ireland, to actively shape their learning and the community that supports it. Other forms of engagement are not excluded from these considerations, in fact, all forms of engagement can also be informed by and interact with authentic student engagement in decision-making.

## Creating an Irish approach to 'student engagement in decision-making'

As detailed previously, in higher education there are many different terms to describe the ways in which student views are considered and the way in which students themselves participate or get involved in decision-making opportunities. These terms are often used interchangeably without pause to consider what they might mean in different contexts. It is important for all students and staff involved in decision-making processes to have a mutual understanding of the phrases that they are using, especially if they are seeking to enhance the role that students play in such processes.

Three of the most commonly used phrases are **student voice**, **student engagement**, and **student partnership**. While these terms are very much related and inter-linked, they are nuanced, and should be considered individually to fully understand them in practice.



## The Steps to Partnership understanding of these terms is as follows:

### Student voice

is the act of students sharing their individual and collective lived experiences within the learning community, 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.

## These three understandings relate to one another as follows:

With varied opportunities for both students and staff, student engagement is an active process of student-staff dialogue 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 the entire learning community. This process of student engagement requires commonly understood approaches in order to flourish.

In short, NStEP sets out student engagement in decision-making as the development of steps towards partnership between students and staff in a way that ensures that partnership is sustained. This framework sets out a way in which to take those steps to partnership.

### Just to note

It is important to explore understandings and definitions of these terms within your own institutional context and as part of your own efforts to develop engagement and partnership activities or approaches. Students and staff may wish to use the definitions above, or they may prefer to set out their own versions as part of their work. Either way, definitions will help to communicate your institutional values and ethos of student engagement to others. Take these steps together!



# Steps to Partnership: The Framework

The *Steps to Partnership* framework has been visualised so that students and staff can utilise it to navigate current practices, identify challenges, and map cohesive ways to improve student engagement in decision-making across the life of their higher education institution. All elements of the framework should consider both the **processes** and **outcomes** of meaningful engagement and partnership. It is important for students and staff to work together to build a shared approach to this framework, interpreting it for their own needs and aspirations, and actively crafting the ways in which they can put it to use for their own contextual setting.

The framework has four key elements: the **four drivers** of student engagement, the **four domains** of student engagement, the **five principles** of student engagement, and the **five enablers** of student engagement. These elements can be remembered as **4-4-5-5**.

Steps to Partnership

The **four drivers** can be considered the cultural bedrock upon which an institution seeks to build an authentic ethos for student engagement.

The **four domains** are the powerhouses which develop and implement strategies that can turn positive student engagement cultures into lived practice.

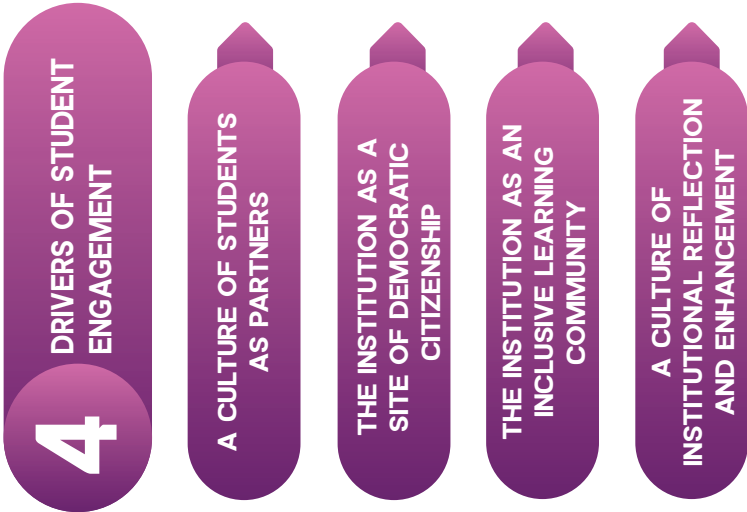
The **five principles** are embedded through individual and collective actions, which foster valuable and meaningful collaborative relationships.

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.

## A summary of the 4-4-5-5 model:

|                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 4 Drivers of Student Engagement    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A culture of students as partners</li><li>• The institution as a site of democratic citizenship</li><li>• The institution as an inclusive learning community</li><li>• A culture of institutional reflection and enhancement</li></ul> |
| 4 Domains of Student Engagement    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Governance and management</li><li>• Teaching and Learning</li><li>• Quality Assurance and Enhancement</li><li>• Student Representation and Organisation</li></ul>                                                                      |
| 5 Principles of Student Engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Dialogue</li><li>• Trust</li><li>• Equity and Inclusivity</li><li>• Empowerment</li><li>• Students as co-creators</li></ul>                                                                                                            |
| 5 Enablers of Student Engagement   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Capacity building</li><li>• Institutional approaches</li><li>• Supportive Policies and Processes</li><li>• Communities of Practice</li><li>• Sustainability</li></ul>                                                                  |





- Dialogue
- Building Trust
- Equity and Inclusivity
- Empowerment
- Students as co-creators



- Capacity Building
- Institutional Approaches
- Supportive Policies and Processes
- Communities of Practice
- Sustainability



## 4

**DRIVERS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

The four drivers can be considered the cultural bedrock upon which an institution seeks to build an authentic ethos for student engagement. Evidencing and demonstrating this ethos across the institution is important to ensure it is recognised by all students and staff.

**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 collective experiences.

**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 and staff, higher education meets a cornerstone of this 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 are 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 institutional reflection and enhancement**

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

**Just  
to  
note****When we refer to ‘institutions’, what do we mean?**

References to higher education ‘institutions’ in this framework broadly refers to all stakeholders and activities that make up the institution itself, including all students and staff, as well as shared governance structures. We recognise that not everyone can drive forward enhancement of student engagement processes in the same way or with the same level of influence. Viewing institutions as a learning community of staff and students with different responsibilities and perspectives does not diminish the need for those with the most influence to champion meaningful student engagement in decision-making, but it does reflect the need to ensure engagement and partnership is inclusive so that there is a shared sense of ownership and belonging across the institutional community.

**4****DOMAINS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

The four domains are the powerhouses which develop and implement strategies that can turn positive student engagement cultures into lived practice. Creating connections across the domains supports student and staff journeys through partnerships that can have real impact on the learning environment.

**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 are balanced 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 is not only rooted in student participation throughout all processes, but the process itself is 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 responsiveness to the needs and aspirations of all students, as well as the 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.

# 5

## PRINCIPLES OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

The five principles are embedded through individual and collective actions, which foster valued, meaningful, and collaborative relationships.

While these principles should be viewed as continuous, they can also be perceived as a journey. Meaningful dialogue (dialogue) builds trust (building trust), developing equitable and inclusive (equity and inclusivity) relationships and structures that can empower each partner (empowerment), ultimately making room for both staff and students to work together to co-create processes and outcomes (students as co-creators).

### 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.

## 5

## ENABLERS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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.

The enablers of student engagement represent a non-exhaustive approach to supporting enhancement of student engagement and the development of partnership approaches. These enablers are a reflection of the key challenges and ideas that NStEP has gathered from across the Irish higher education sector. Alignment of these enablers to current policies and practices, and as part of new initiatives, can support the emergence of more sustained engagement.

### Capacity Building

Effective capacity building can occur through exploration of existing structures and strategies, utilising existing conversations and spaces to weave in the principles of student engagement, and supporting individuals and groups to recognise existing practice upon which to build.

Student training and capacity building across activities, nurturing student leadership, and promoting the ways in which students inform decision-making.

Staff training and professional development that has engagement and partnership with students as a core underpinning and recognisable ethos.

Effective use of evidence and data that demonstrably involves students and staff working together across evidence gathering and analysis opportunities or mechanisms.

Building links across engagement activities, particularly recognising the role of other forms of engagement to support the development of partnership cultures in the learning community.

Developing multi-directional communications and feedback processes that supports a more active culture of dialogue, rather than simply information transmission.

### Institutional Approaches

Shared institution-wide approaches can foster a sense of co-ownership and mutual vision or aims. Systematic student engagement values both top-down and bottom-up approaches, recognising that student engagement happens in both unique and commonly understood ways in every corner of the institution.

Strengthening the relationship between HEI governance and students' union/student representation structures by identifying shared vision and priorities that can form the basis for wider partnership efforts across the learning community.

Creating systematic approaches by setting out formal, semi-formal, and informal mechanisms and supports for student engagement in decision-making that demonstrates a responsive institutional culture.

Multi-level and cross-departmental approaches that respects contextual differences, while simultaneously demonstrating consistency and transparency for student participation.

Mapping and developing a collaborative approach across all corners of the institution, including professional support services.

Fostering links across the four domains to increase a sense of community, with a strong emphasis on taking stock and reflection on what works well and what could be improved.

## Supportive Policies and Processes

Embedding good practice in student engagement is an ongoing endeavour which requires space for reflection to learn from it, the development of scaffolding to support it, and opportunities to amplify it.

The investment of targeted time and resources that can support wider strategies and aims, recognising that student engagement efforts are often carried out voluntarily by students and as additional activities by staff.

Policy and strategy development with partnership embedded throughout design and development phases, maximising and valuing the expertise and experiences that students and staff each brings to this process.

Ensuring broad student participation across traditional structures and processes, while avoiding pre-determination of interests or aspirations.

Developing shared ownership of processes and the ways in which agreed actions are implemented, that does not silo responsibilities and avoids setting out stringent role descriptors.

Actively demystifying student engagement and partnership throughout institutional policies and processes, promoting the good work underway across institutional activity.

## Communities of Practice

Engagement is elevated to partnership by fostering shared communities of practice between staff and students, underpinned by the concept that students are experts in their own learning experience.

Capturing and recognising current good practices, building upon existing practice and mainstreaming practices that are identified as beneficial across the institution.

Ensuring projects and initiatives are co-designed, taking steps to explore aims and objectives together, developing approaches that are manageable while openly sharing challenges.

Shifting practices from models of transmission to models of influence or choice across the domains of student engagement, moving from inviting students to be involved to a more active culture of participation.

Facilitating a variety of opportunities for peer-to-peer engagement, supporting autonomous spaces for student democracy and leadership, while nurturing other forms of engagement as an important part of building a sense of student belonging to their institution and their learning.

Fostering spaces for sharing from across the disciplines, learning from the diversity of approaches and priorities that students and staff identify within their individual contexts.

## Sustainability

Higher education is a transient sector. Not only do students transition through within a relatively short space of time, but staff changes are also frequent, while policies, activities, and the learning environment rarely stays the same for long. This ever-changing environment can be embraced within student engagement practices, rather than viewed as a barrier.

An emphasis on belonging and wellbeing within higher education recognises the hugely important role of student engagement in decision-making, where student voice and partnership builds resilience, understanding, and fosters positive outreach.

Developing clear milestones throughout the learning environment, across processes of governance, as well as within project lifecycles can ensure staff and students share a sense of purpose in their engagements and can more easily assess successes or challenges within restrictive timeframes.

When mapping or planning the lifecycle of activities across the domains, student engagement and partnership could be clearly emphasised and aligned to wider strategies, providing greater opportunities for reflection on progress.



Incentive, recognition, and reward for student engagement activities can promote the value and achievements of students and staff, as well as support continuity across academic years through practice sharing.

Embedding student engagement discussions more effectively into inductions and relationship-building opportunities emphasises the collectivism of the learning community from an earlier stage, while reflective handover processes across the domains can allow students and staff to understand the impact of their partnerships.



## The NStEP Commitment for Steps to Partnership

The National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP), on behalf of our three partner organisations, has been tasked with leading the creation of this framework, of maintaining and promoting it, and to support students and staff to utilise it to achieve their aims and aspirations for change-making in higher education.

*Steps to Partnership* is just the next phase in the development of enhancement activities and initiatives in student engagement in decision-making in Ireland. Therefore, NStEP's commitment to the Irish higher education sector is that this framework and the ways in which we support it will evolve in order to ensure its continued relevance.

## NStEP will support Steps to Partnership by:

- Actively promoting this framework.
- Creating resources and toolkits to support this framework
- Supporting institutions to develop and evolve student engagement through the exploration of this framework
- Promoting good practice and case studies from across Irish higher education
- Developing new initiatives and projects to support the use of this framework
- Seeking to inform the implementation of this framework from international experience
- Championing and celebrating students and staff working to enhance student engagement in decision-making
- Communicating the framework to the widest possible audience of students and staff
- Continuing to develop national communities of practice to further advance this work
- Ensuring that our approach to student engagement is recognised by national organisations
- Regularly reviewing this framework, with the support of the higher education sector, to ensure its continued relevance.

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

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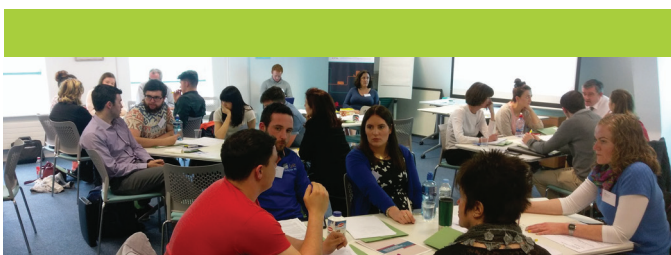
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