

NStEP Strategy

2022 - 2025



**National Student
Engagement Programme**

Clár Rannpháirtíochta Náisiúnta
na Mac Léinn

Foreword from the NStEP Partners

The NStEP Strategy 2022 - 2025 builds on the success of the previous strategy from 2019 - 2021. It comes at a time when student engagement has arguably never been so prominent as it is now. Not only did the onset of the pandemic create a new appreciation for the ways in which students can inform change in the sector, it highlighted the critical need to ensure that they are present throughout decision-making, policymaking, and as valued partners in the learning community. The temporary shutdown of on-campus and in-person learning during the pandemic meant that every aspect of the learning experience, much of which was taken for granted, had to change. Engagement was critical in such upheaval.

When the Higher Education Authority, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, and the Union of Students in Ireland, came together in 2016 to launch NStEP, it represented a unique and innovative national collaboration that sought to put the student as partner model at the core of Irish higher education. When we set out to reflect on the successes and challenges since 2016 with students, staff, and stakeholders as part of the development of this new strategy, one common thread emerged. That thread was that NStEP has both directly and indirectly acted as a catalyst for a big culture change in a remarkably short space of time.

NStEP has championed a greater role for students in the way higher education works and has magnified the huge amount of good practice that is evident across the sector. As a result, the programme has evolved with a changing sector. The QQI CINNTE institutional quality reviews and the HEA strategic dialogue meetings all point to a greater emphasis and recognition for student engagement. National priorities such as student success, equity of access, digital teaching and learning, staff professional development, and student wellbeing, to name just a few, demonstrate irrefutably that student engagement in decision-making underpins sectoral transformation and change. The impending Higher Education Authority Act will place even greater emphasis on this underpinning.

While the previous strategy sought to ensure NStEP and student engagement became core aspects of the national landscape, this strategy represents an ambitious plan to demonstrably embed authentic student engagement further.



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Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn



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NStEP@USI.ie



National Student
Engagement Programme



National Student Engagement
Programme (NStEP)



[NStEPie](https://twitter.com/NStEPie)



www.studentengagement.ie/strategy

About NStEP - Our role in the Irish higher education sector

The National Student Engagement Programme, known as NStEP, has worked since 2016 to place engagement and partnership between students and staff at the very heart of Irish higher education. The work of NStEP not only seeks to embed the student voice across all levels of the sector, but actively creates initiatives that supports a vision of a learning community where students are partners in the decision-making process. NStEP champions a democratic higher education and a student learning experience that is collaboratively co-created by students and staff together.

NStEP is a partnership of the Higher Education Authority (HEA), Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and the Union of Students in Ireland (USI). This partnership supports projects aimed at enhancing student engagement across four domains - governance and management, quality assurance and enhancement, teaching and learning, and student representation and organisation.

Our Vision

To inform, guide and support an Irish higher education landscape that **fosters student-staff partnership**, at both the national and institutional level, by **enhancing student engagement**.

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 create and sustain meaningful partnership with students**.

Strategic Priorities

- A) Strengthening the value of student engagement at the national level**
- B) Developing the leadership capabilities of students in Irish higher education**
- C) Supporting staff to create and sustain meaningful partnership with students**

Key Milestones for NStEP 2016 - 2022

- NStEP launched by the HEA, QQI, and USI
- HEA publish Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision-Making report
- The NStEP Student Training Programme begins
- NStEP Institutional Analysis workshops begin with sparqs.



- Online and Postgraduate taught trainings piloted for student reps.
- The second National Student Engagement Network
- NStEP development event for students' unions held in NUIG
- NStEP expands to include 23 higher education institutions



2016

2017

2018

2019



- Collaborative student engagement projects begin
- The first NStEP Student Associate Intern joins the team
- NStEP expands from five to eighteen participating institutions
- First Student Quality Assurance Pool training delivered
- The National Student Engagement Network is launched in CIT



- Pilot student engagement short course for staff in Maynooth University.
- First workshop on institutional student partnership held in DKIT
- NStEP strategy 2019-2021 is published

- Publication of project reports, guides, and resources
- The NStEP team expands with the recruitment of a Development Coordinator
- Culture of Partnership workshop piloted with DCU and DCUSU
- Covid-19 forces the shutdown of on-campus higher education. Students and staff work round the clock to adapt.
- NStEP launches online resource hub in response to the pandemic
- The student training programme moves online
- Empowerment and Partnership in Student Engagement conference with StudentSurvey.ie and QQI.

2020



2021

- Representing Diversity training is piloted with UCCSU and IADTSU
- First NStEP Student Voice Summit with USI
- The Student Engagement Recognition Awards open for the first time
- Postgraduate student engagement report published
- The Steps to Partnership framework for authentic student engagement is launched
- The NStEP Student Trainer team co-creates a new Advanced Class Rep training
- Steps to Partnership open course for professional development begins with the National Forum

- NStEP begins period of reflection and consultation for the next strategy for 2022+
- NStEP supports the National Student Associate Assembly in partnership with the HEA, NFETL, and USI
- NStEP and AISHE-J publish co-edited Special Issue journal on student engagement and partnership
- NStEP student training programme passes 5500 students trained mark!
- NStEP Strategy 2022-2025 is launched!

2022



What did NStEP achieve from our last strategy?

In 2019, NStEP set out an ambitious national strategy to enhance student engagement in decision-making, building on a successful pilot and programme roll-out from 2016. The strategy outlined three crucial strands - championing and advancing student engagement nationally, an expanded programme of activities for student leaders, and supporting institutional enhancement activity through student-staff partnership approaches.

Steps to Partnership - establishing a national approach

During the development of the previous strategy, you told us that NStEP needed to provide a clear vision for concepts and practices in student engagement and partnership that reflected the journey and experiences of students and staff. As a result, a core undertaking for NStEP was to create a new national framework for student engagement in decision-making.

Key achievements:

- NStEP facilitated dialogue across the sector, reviewed international practice, and ran an innovative 'Student Engagement Chat' campaign which informed a student-staff project team tasked with developing a new framework.
- *Steps to Partnerships: A Framework for Authentic Student Engagement in Decision-Making* was subsequently published in 2021, building on the earlier HEA report from 2016.
- An interactive framework was launched on our website and national postage campaign launched to reach diverse audiences.

Embedding student engagement in national policymaking

A key indicator of success for NStEP, was to be able to demonstrate tangible impact on higher education policy. Since then, NStEP has supported, facilitated, and contributed to discourse, practice, and policymaking across the sector and beyond. Student engagement is now a core underpinning feature of student success strategies and practices, student voice for marginalised and under-represented groups is recognised within access policy and concepts of student partnership and shared decision-making is evident in the *Next Steps* project undertaken by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. The role of student engagement has also become much more prevalent throughout various aspects of the quality agenda, with student engagement a prevalent consideration in the QFI report on *The Impact of COVID-19 Modifications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment in Irish Further Education and Training and Higher Education (2020)* during the pandemic.

Student engagement is also directly referenced in the *National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework* as an important factor in increasing a sense of student belonging and wellbeing in higher education.

As our partners in the HEA prepare for the impending passage of the Higher Education Authority Act, NStEP can also point to the significant presence of student engagement throughout the draft bill. This new legislation recognises that student engagement is now front-and-centre across policy remits and priorities, putting additional emphasis on NStEP's efforts to continually enhance and elevate the role of students within decision-making.

Key achievements:

- Development and delivery of training for students' union officers to support them in meeting their objectives.
- Supported and facilitated dialogue on a range of national policy issues, including support to students during Technological University designation and QQI CINNTE processes, as well as contributed to the *Student and Learner Wellbeing and Engagement Working Group* which was chaired by USI, in conjunction with the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science (DFHERIS).
- Expanded the national Quality Assurance Reviewers Pool, ensuring that the influential role of students in integral quality processes is fully realised.

Supporting and championing good practice

A key aim of the previous NStEP strategy was to publish resources and to share good practice. NStEP supported the publication of guides, reports and toolkits developed by students and staff across the sector, on topics such as student feedback, the use of data, effective class representation systems, and guidance for staff across various remits. Supporting effective student engagement in programme and institutional governance has been core to this work.

Importantly, as a student-driven and student-led programme, our Student Trainers and Student Associates led on the development of a range of resources for both students and staff.

Key achievements:

- A series of 'Quick Guides' published to support good practice during the emerging pandemic.
- Collaboration and co-editorial with AISHE-Journal on a *Special Issue for Student Engagement and Partnership*, including the recruitment and training of students as academic peer reviewers.
- Regular collaborations with national partner organisations and networks to inform policy and practice, including on assessment, student success, and postgraduate research.
- Launch of an online resource hub, as well as a new 'Student Portal'.
- Partnered with QQI and StudentSurvey.ie to deliver a major national conference on *Empowerment and Partnership in Student Engagement*.

Internationally focused and internationally recognised

From the moment NStEP was envisaged, an international focus has been central to success. We have maintained and grown our connections with sparqs in Scotland, as well as with other networks across the UK and further afield, seeking to learn from their practices. Throughout our projects and events, we have sought to ensure our student and staff networks can learn from internationally recognised good practice, and that they can apply these ideas here in Ireland.

Key achievements:

- Regular events and conferences organised featuring invited experts and speakers from across the globe.
- Informed practice in a number of countries, as well as contributing to publications, projects, and conferences internationally.
- Strengthened and diversified our use of international practice and academic literature across our project areas.
- NStEP recognised in Student Participation Without Borders (STUPS) publication as an inspiring practice from within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).
- Regular sharing of practice with sparqs, NUS-USI, NUS UK, Student Voice Australia, RAISE Network (UK), among others.

Expanding student training and development opportunities

Since our foundation, the NStEP Student Training Programme has been central to our mission. Building on the successful roll-out of Introductory Class Rep Training from 2016 to 2019, we undertook a significant revision of the training, reflecting upon the experiences of class representatives, student leaders, and the staff who work with them. This resulted in a range of new resources and ensured that NStEP was able to move the training online in an accessible and imaginative way during the pandemic.

Two additional training options have been developed, providing opportunities for students to build on the skills they develop in the introductory training. Representing Diversity Training and Advanced Class Rep Training were both developed by student members of the NStEP team. More advanced training options provide NStEP with an opportunity to support students to envision ways to elevate the student voice, build on successful engagement practices, and create space for partnership with staff.

Key achievements:

- Increased our national Student Trainer team and developed an NStEP-specific 'train the trainer' model.
- Complete revision of the Introductory Class Rep Training to suit the Irish context for academic representation and to enable the training to be accessibly delivered online.
- The NStEP Student Team co-created an Advanced Class Rep Training and a suite of resources, receiving hugely positive feedback from students.
- The first online self-study modules, primarily for class reps, are now hosted on the NStEP website. A new Student Engagement Recognition Awards scheme is now available for academic representatives to gain reward for their efforts. The recognition and reward scheme now allows NStEP to gather evidence annually on the experience of academic representatives in their roles.
- Developed a system of ongoing communication with student representatives to support initiatives across the programme's work, ensuring student representatives were engaged beyond initial training.
- Supported the National Student Associate Assembly, in partnership with the HEA and USI, to examine students as partners in assessment, as well as contributions to equality, diversity, and inclusion. A core outcome of the work of the Assembly will be to inform future practice at the national level to support students as partners.

Inclusive student engagement

During 2020-2021, an NStEP Student Associate led the development of a new training session on Representing Diversity. This training has supported student representatives to better understand the diverse experiences of their peers, to more confidently represent this diversity, and to empower others to take up representative roles. Embedding this training across our development opportunities is now a core aim of the programme.

Another NStEP Student Associate project examined the barriers and enablers for postgraduate student engagement in decision-making. The roles of postgraduates, both taught and research, as partners in higher education continues to require specific focus. NStEP is currently supporting a QQI-USI led working group on postgraduate research (PGR) student engagement as a result of a recommendation from a recent European Universities Association (EUA) Solutions report on the *National Framework for Doctoral Education*, which emphasised the need to enhance PGR representation in governance.

Key achievements:

- Student-led development of a 'Representing Diversity' training for class representatives, in collaboration with external partners.
- Delivery of a cross-sectoral project on postgraduate student engagement, with publication of report on key themes and barriers to PG participation.
- Improved monitoring of postgraduate, mature, and part-time student participation in our training and development opportunities.
- NStEP has ensured equality, diversity, and inclusion has been a prevalent aspect of events and webinars, as well as partnering with USI on a number of student events.

Collaboration with higher education institutions

Since the development of institutional analysis workshops in 2017, NStEP has supported an ever-growing network of higher education institutions and students' unions to collaboratively identify areas for enhanced student engagement practice. We have continued to offer our analysis workshops, shifting these to online delivery during the pandemic, and introducing new reporting and follow-up support for institutional and student leaders to navigate and action findings. Working with a diverse range of institutions, NStEP has developed a number of bespoke workshops, looking at issues around student feedback, student success, and institutional governance. In March 2020, just prior to the temporary shutdown of on-campus activity, NStEP piloted a successful Culture of Partnership Workshop. At the heart of our work NStEP seeks to reflect the ambitions for student engagement across our participating network of 28 higher education institutions.

Key achievements:

- Published guides and reports to support improved student-staff partnership activities, including through student representative systems, staff roles, and partnership mapping.
- Revised our 'Institutional Analysis of Student Engagement' workshop materials and produced reports for participating institutions.
- Created a new 'Culture of Partnership' workshop model, as well as other bespoke workshops.
- Increased the number of higher education institutions and students' unions participating in NStEP, growing our network and dialogue with the sector.

Building connections and support for staff in higher education

In partnership with the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, and aligned to the national professional development framework, NStEP co-created an open course for student engagement in decision-making. The open course for staff could be considered a first-of-its-kind in the world of student engagement, providing a national professional development opportunity, underpinned by a supportive network of practitioners. Entitled Steps to Partnership, mirroring the new framework, the 25-hour open course involved staff from across 19 institutions and explored themes, concepts, and practices that can foster impactful student engagement. The open course received very positive feedback, and after a review of the course by a team of students and staff in early 2022, new opportunities to reach a far greater number of staff have been identified.

Key achievements:

- Building on an initial staff professional development pilot in 2019, NStEP developed a new open course for professional development, aligned to the Steps to Partnership framework, delivered for the first time in late 2021.
- NStEP has sought to improve communications to reach a diverse range of staff across the sector, ensuring their interests and perspectives were included and evidenced in to our work.
- An ongoing case study campaign will allow NStEP to build a greater bank of good practice that can be disseminated to staff and students alike across the sector.

Building on Success:

What did the 2022 strategic consultation tell us?

From January to April 2022, NStEP embarked on a period of reflection to inform this new strategy. During this period, NStEP met with 60 staff and students across 20 consultation meetings, gathered the views of 54 people through an online questionnaire, reviewed 114 class rep reports, considered feedback across our activities from the previous strategy, carried out a review of our staff professional development open course, and analysed a significant amount of evidence from across our online and communications platforms.

Engaging across the sector, with students, staff, and stakeholders, we were pleased to hear that NStEP has had an influential and positive impact on the development of student engagement in Irish higher education. We were consistently informed that NStEP, from its inception, has provided a strong reference point for all those who seek to champion and embed authentic engagement and partnership practices with students across governance, teaching and learning, and quality processes.

From our consultations across higher education, we learned that:

- NStEP has a positive and valued impact on student engagement through our training, workshops, and networks.
- NStEP is a catalyst for change, generating authentic student engagement in both tangible and indirect ways.
- NStEP is well recognised, but by growing our visibility and supports for both students and staff, we can strengthen our role in policy and practice.
- The pandemic has been a critical moment for student engagement, creating momentum that NStEP must harness for enhancement.
- The Steps to Partnership framework can be considered international best practice, so we must ensure it is recognised by a broad audience.
- Efforts to increase equality, diversity, and inclusion through student engagement must be central to our aims and actions, as well as empowering students from marginalised and under-represented groups.
- NStEP should continue to facilitate and support institutional change through nationally focused sharing of good practice.
- Student-led training and development opportunities are of consistently high quality and have the potential for even greater impact for student-staff partnership.
- There are increasing opportunities to explore enhanced student engagement at all levels, from programme quality to institutional governance, as a direct result of work to date.
- Supporting student representatives and institutional leaders to grow their collaboration and engagement remains central to success.
- Embedding a national culture of students as partners can only emerge by supporting collaboration, co-design, and co-creation between students and staff.
- Increasing our emphasis on demonstrable case studies and exemplars of good practice will provide greater opportunity to grow our networks.
- A dedicated programme of opportunities for staff professional development is an obvious next step for the programme.

A National Understanding of Student Engagement: Steps to Partnership

A key component of the previous NStEP strategy was to co-create a new national approach to the concepts and practices of student engagement and partnership. This new approach needed to reflect the lived experiences, expertise and aspirations of students and staff across the sector. From 2020 to 2021, NStEP collaborated with students and staff to imagine this new approach, culminating in the publication of Steps to Partnership: A Framework for Authentic Student Engagement in Decision-Making.

The successful implementation of our 2022-2025 strategy will rest on embedding Steps to Partnership into discourse, policy, and practice in Irish higher education.

A snapshot: What does Steps to Partnership say?

The framework positions the work of NStEP in four key domains of student engagement. These are (i) governance and management, (ii) quality assurance and enhancement, (iii) teaching and learning, and (iv) student representation and organisation. Steps to Partnership is guided by five principles of student engagement, which are (i) dialogue, (ii) building trust, (iii) equity and inclusivity, (iv) empowerment, and (v) students as co-creators.

Three inter-related definitions or understandings are outlined:

1

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.

2

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.

3

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.



Our Ethos:

How will NStEP deliver our priorities?

The NStEP approach to embedding student engagement and fostering partnership between students and staff demonstrates our values and ethos.

- Across the work of NStEP, an ethos of constantly **evolving and sustainable partnership** is critical to success.
- **Continual enhancement** of the learning experience is a core value in Irish higher education. NStEP seeks to promote this ethos through our work in student engagement.
- NStEP not only seeks to develop **good practice**, but also to amplify and promote good practice from across the sector. Not only can students and staff benefit from our work, but NStEP can also benefit from their work in developing partnership.
- Across all of NStEP's activities, initiatives, and contributions to policy, we remain committed to ensuring that the **diverse lived experiences** of wider society and the higher education community is reflected and acted upon.
- At the heart of our ethos is the ideal of a **democratic, transparent, and inclusive learning community**. Student engagement in decision-making contributes to this ideal, and as such, we believe that student engagement also contributes to wider **societal and civic participation** in Irish life today.
- Through empowering members of the learning community, NStEP seeks to contribute to the wider mission of higher education in the **development of skills and attributes**.
- Through meaningful engagement and partnership between students and staff, NStEP believes that there are significant opportunities for the **creation of new knowledge** and ways of thinking in Irish higher education.



Strategic Priority **A**

Strengthening the value of student engagement at the national level

Building a shared vision and approach to student engagement is essential to NStEP's success, to inform national policy setting, while ensuring that we can support the Irish higher education sector to learn from and contribute to international good practice.

NStEP will work towards embedding our Steps to Partnership framework, published in 2022, and towards sustainable student engagement practices that enhances the learning experience for the benefit of all.

Objectives	Key Performance Indicators
<p>A1. Embed the NStEP Steps to Partnership framework across sectoral activities, enabling and empowering institutions and students' unions to foster sustainable partnership practices.</p>	<p>A1.1. The Steps to Partnership framework is embedded in national policies, HEI strategies, system performance frameworks, strategic dialogues, and throughout quality processes with evidence that it has informed reflective practices and approaches to student engagement.</p>
<p>A2. Facilitate and contribute to national dialogue and collaboration for effective policymaking underpinned by student partnership, building on the status of NStEP as an internationally recognised model of good practice.</p>	<p>A2.1. There is clear evidence that NStEP has enabled policymaking at the national and institutional levels, increasing awareness and exemplars of authentic student engagement, particularly as a result of the impending Higher Education Authority Act.</p>
<p>A3. Lead and participate in thematic events, ensuring that meaningful, valuable, and sustainable student partnership models are championed at the national level.</p>	<p>A3.1. At least three national-level workshops, and two conferences or networks annually to share practice, capture impact, and support positive disruption and innovation in student engagement.</p>

Strategic Priority **B**

Developing the leadership capabilities of students in Irish higher education

Strengthening NStEP's training and development opportunities for students, fostering diversity in student representation, and ensuring that the contributions of students are recognised and rewarded is central to our mission.

NStEP will explore new ways to empower all students to engage with decision-making in higher education. NStEP must take ambitious steps to develop and recognise the skills and expertise of all students as potential partners in their education.

Objectives	Key Performance Indicators
<p>B1. Deliver and expand the national student training programme with opportunities available to students and student representatives, with emphasis on realising their full potential as partners in higher education, including formal recognition of their achievements.</p>	<p>B1.1. Increase student participation in all student training, development, and recognition opportunities offered by NStEP by 10% annually, ensuring that this participation reflects the diversity of the student body, mirroring national targets for inclusion and access.</p>
<p>B2. Collaborate with students' unions on national and institutional policy themes, informing good practice and building their capacity to further influence change.</p>	<p>B2.1. Four to six scheduled briefings per academic year on NStEP activities and national priorities, with enabling resources for students' unions to engage in higher education policy issues with institutional leadership.</p>
<p>B3. Identify the barriers and enablers for students and student representatives when participating in core institutional decision-making, governance, and quality arrangements.</p>	<p>B3.1. Minimum of two collaborative projects driven by students and staff from across the sector co-creating and co-producing suites of resources that have a measurable impact on student engagement in decision-making within their programmes of study and their institutions.</p>

Strategic Priority

Supporting staff to create and sustain meaningful partnership with students

NStEP has shaped a vision for student-staff partnership across the sector, but this requires concerted and dedicated efforts to support staff at all levels and in a variety of roles, championing new and existing practices, and creating space to share that practice.

NStEP will seek to develop a new professional development programme for staff, building a roadmap for co-creation and collaboration, supporting staff and students to foster and champion student engagement practices together.

Objectives	Key Performance Indicators
<p>C1. Design and implement an accessible and inclusive programme of staff professional development activities and opportunities to support enhanced student engagement practices.</p>	<p>C1.1. Development and roll-out of a suite of staff professional development initiatives, involving staff across remits and responsibilities, proactively responding to their needs and interests, with increased participation over the lifetime of the strategy.</p>
<p>C2. Facilitate both institutional and smaller-scale partnership projects through co-creation between staff and students, that can inspire innovative ways of thinking in higher education.</p>	<p>C2.1. Demonstrable good practice from across the domains of student engagement, shared across networks and supported by an online resource hub.</p>
<p>C3. Engage institutional senior leadership in dialogue and collaboration to enhance key student engagement activities .</p>	<p>C3.1. Sustained engagement with institutional senior leadership through our professional development opportunities, institutional support initiatives, and national workshops.</p>



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