



Postgraduate Integration with TCDSU-AMLCT

Madeline Jane Quill, Niamh Donnelly, Martin John McAndrew

Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn (AMLÉ)

Trinity College Dublin Students' Union-Aontas Mac Léinn Choláiste na Tríonóide (TCDSU-AMLCT)

Postgraduate Workers Organisation (PWO)

This case study will explore the history of postgraduate student and researcher representation in Trinity College Dublin, the integration between the former Graduate Students Union and Trinity College Dublin Students' Union—Aontas na Mac Léinn Choláiste na Tríonóide, and the future of postgraduate representation at Trinity College Dublin.

Introduction and Context

History of the Trinity College Dublin Graduate Students' Union

Trinity College Dublin (TCD) has had a long history of postgraduate representation under varying forms, and this is still very much a work in progress, which is why it was chosen for the first case study of postgraduate student and researcher engagement undertaken by the National Postgraduate Engagement Network (NPEN).

The first representative body established for **any** student cohorts in TCD was the Graduate Students' Union (GSU), established in 1973.ⁱ Notably, while a student representative council for undergraduate students existed in tandem with the GSU at the time, this would not become Trinity College Dublin Student's Union-Aontas Mac Léinn Choláiste na Tríonóide (TCDSU-AMLCT) until after the GSUs formation.ⁱⁱ The primary purpose of establishing the GSU was to advocate for the social and political needs of postgraduate researchers, primarily as it pertains to their status as workers. This was done in conjunction with undergraduate students and while the GSU existed, it operated a Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) with TCDSU-AMLCT to align both unions on shared advocacy goals.ⁱⁱⁱ

Despite this MoA, the two unions began to diverge both in their operational structures and political goals. Notably, this divergence had been set in motion before the formation of the GSU, with the establishment of Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn (AMLÉ), known then as the Union of Students in Ireland (USI) in 1959. As per AMLÉ's constitution, it can only accept a student's union into its confederal membership if that union can reasonably claim to represent the majority of a student body in a Higher Education Institution. As such, what would then become TCDSU-AMLCT had a greater claim to membership of AMLÉ than the GSU, which created a point of contention between the two unions, whereby postgraduates were represented under a body which had no access to national representation.

As the undergraduate student union grew and expanded, it gained new funding streams from commercial opportunities such as retail outlets, some of which still exist today.^{iv} With increased revenue, this allowed for the “sabbaticalising” of TCDSU-AMLCT, whereby full-time, “sabbatical” officer posts could be created, intended for students who wished to take a year out from their studies to work for the union. This has now become standard practice in the vast majority of Irish students’ unions, following precedent established first in the UK.^v

The GSU meanwhile, lacked these commercial opportunities, and the necessary capital needed to create sabbatical roles, causing disparities to grow in the advocacy outreach of the two unions and causing the GSU to become more isolated and specialised. As a result, the early co-operative efforts between the two unions ceased for some time, and questions began to be asked as to the necessity of having two unions.

The GSU did not have any major influence on College until the late 1990s, with a surge in research postgraduates, necessitating the establishment of a sabbatical President to cater for the increase in membership, followed by a Vice-President introduced to deal with casework. In addition to this, the passing of the [Universities Act 1997](#) necessitated university governing authorities have one post-graduate student elected by the post-graduate students among their membership, giving the GSU renewed legitimacy.

This was followed by a major revision in 2010 to the [Consolidated Statutes of Trinity College Dublin and of the University of Dublin](#) which established the principle and functions within College governance of the two students’ unions, as well as providing for equal representation of both unions on relevant committees.

Despite these changes, major disparities still existed between the funding, profile, capacity of the two unions. This was reflected across the culture of the wider student movement, where the primary attention in student advocacy was historically always directed towards undergraduate concerns, with postgraduate matters remaining in a “permanent minority” status. In addition to this, the vast majority of sabbatical officers in Ireland still continue to be from undergraduate backgrounds, which creates a knowledge gap and questions around how these officers are meant to effectively lobby on, and support casework for postgraduates, when they lack the lived experience. Regardless of whether or not a separate student body is needed, it was becoming evident that additional postgraduate capacity is still needed to ensure that student advocacy is carried out for all students, and not just the majority.

Derecognition of the Graduate Students’ Union (GSU)

The “beginning of the end” for the GSU came with an increased focus on international postgraduate taught education, largely due to the large fees brought in by these students, particularly non-EU students. Up until 2010, the sabbatical officer posts of the GSU were nearly always held by PhD candidates, however with an increase in postgraduate taught students, this started to shift the focus of the union away from research as masters students began to be elected to sabbatical roles. This led to a general downturn in activity from PhD candidates in the union, resulting in a general democratic devolution of the union.

In 2020, major issues with the governance and finances with the GSU began to emerge. A voting fraud scandal in the GSU class representative elections massively undermined trust in the unions ability to function democratically.^{vi} This was followed in 2021 by worsening relationships between the GSU and TCDSU-AMLCT, and an Emergency General Meeting of the GSU to formally divest representative responsibilities from TCDSU-AMLCT, with the GSU declaring themselves to be the “sole representative body for the Graduate Students of Trinity”.^{vii}

Despite this, TCDSU-AMLCT affirmed that they still had a constitutional obligation to continue representing post-graduates.^{viii} In 2022, major issues around financial transparency and governance arose with the GSU, resulting in the Trinity Board announcing on the 22nd of September the formal defunding the GSU due to a failure to submit accounts, the severing of ties between the GSU and the College, the removal all GSU representatives from committees, the reallocation all funding for postgraduate purposes to TCDSU-AMLCT, and the mandating of TCDSU-AMLCT to develop postgraduate representative structures. The final death knell for the GSU was the dissolving of the Memorandum of Agreement between the GSU and TCDSU-AMLCT following allegations of sexual misconduct against the GSU President and electoral constitutional breaches.^{ix}

Postgraduate Integration Within TCDSU-AMLCT

In the immediate aftermath of the derecognition of the GSU, TCDSU-AMLCT organised Postgraduate Town Halls on the 4th and 5th of October 2022^x, and the 24th of January 2023^{xi} to discuss immediate, interim and long-term arrangements providing for postgraduate representation within TCDSU-AMLCT. At these Town Halls, many post-graduates highlighted concerns around remaining GSU finances and the election of postgraduate representatives to TCDSU-AMLCT.^{xii} These Town Halls were immediately followed by the commencement of postgraduate class & discipline representative elections by TCDSU-AMLCT, followed by subsequently asking these representatives to put themselves forward for positions on College Committees.

It was also around this time that the prospect of separating postgraduate taught and research representative structures was proposed by the now-defunct TCD Postgraduate Workers' Alliance (TCD PWA), one of the parent organisations of the [Postgraduate Workers' Organisation](#).^{xiii} The PWO was established in January 2023 as a merger between the PWA and the PhD Collective Action Union (PCAU) to campaign on postgraduate workers' rights across Ireland, and became a significant driving factor in the integration of postgraduates into TCDSU-AMLCT, with many PWO representatives taking up elected discipline and committee positions.

Following the Postgraduate Town Halls and numerous other forms of consultation with the postgraduate community, four pathways for postgraduate integration were proposed by the then-TCDSU President, as published in the TCDSU-AMLCT Long-Term Representation strategy on the 13th of March 2023^{xiv}:

1. The re-establishment of a distinct body which represents taught (PGT) and research (PGR) postgraduate students.
2. The integration of PGT and PGR into TCDSU.
3. The integration of PGT into TCDSU with PGR forming its own body.
4. The integration of PGR into TCDSU with PGT forming its own body.

Following this, on the 19th of April 2023, a non-binding plebiscite, or referendum was run by TCDSU-AMLCT as to these four pathways, with a strong indication from research postgraduates that they wished to see the establishment of a new, separate body to represent them.^{xv, xvi} Due to the non-binding nature of this plebiscite, and a wish by TCDSU-AMLCT for any new representative bodies to be established by the communities affected, this left the representative situation in a limbo, with the responsibility for constitutionally implementing any such changes being up to the incoming TCDSU-AMLCT sabbatical officer team in June 2023.

It was not until August 2024, when a revised plan for postgraduate integration was proposed by TCDSU-AMLCT, entailing the establishment of a subgroup for Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs), the PGR Forum that would act as a body for the discussion of PGR issues, and the development of internal motions, in addition to it being chaired by an elected Postgraduate Research Officer, a current researcher who would be paid on a contractual basis, along with the election of PGR representatives for different PhD cohorts. It was also proposed that a Postgraduate Taught Officer would be introduced, and paid as a full-time sabbatical officer.^{xvii} This integration plan was formally approved by a motion brought to the TCDSU-AMLCT Council in November 2024.^{xviii}

In Spring 2025, the PGR Forum was successfully trialled, which entailed including a college-wide forum & several faculty-level PGR townhalls run as a collaboration between SU PGR reps and the TCD PWO branch. These were well-received and well-attended, and they contributed to successful negotiations to improve conditions for PGRs at the departmental and faculty levels. An example of a matter discussed and actioned upon by the fora was For was the advertising of Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) positions to PGRs, as these positions were difficult for new PGRs to find until this issue was raised at a forum and shared with the Heads of Departments.

In October 2025, following this trial period, the matter of postgraduate integration was brought to referendum, however the proposed implementation differed from the proposed integration plan in 2024. Instead of creating a sabbatical PGT Officer, the referendum entailed the creation of a sabbatical Graduate Officer, who would represent both PGTs **and** PGRs. Instead of creating a paid part-time PGR Officer meanwhile, two part-time positions were to be created, the Postgraduate Taught and Postgraduate Research Officers, both of which were unpaid. Finally, there were no provisions introduced for PGR representatives for yearly PhD cohorts, instead having faculty and school-level representatives.^{xxix} Despite the concerns of PGRs surrounding the implications of these changes, the referendum was passed by an 87% majority, although it is unclear how much of this was from undergraduate voting.^{xxx}

A Path Forward for Postgraduate Representation

This presently leaves TCDSU-AMLCT with some degree of certainty as to the path forward for postgraduate representation, although some reservations remain as to the engagement of the union with individual researchers and grassroots groups such as the PWO. The PGR Forum has been established as a formal committee of the union, although its membership is primarily made up of elected officers and faculty representatives, with minimal scope for individual involvement.^{xxxi} A sabbatical Graduate Officer has been established for the first time in TCDSU-AMLCT, mirroring a similar role in [UCD Students' Union](#), however there is the potential for postgraduate taught students to dominate this role, as became the case in the GSU, or for postgraduate issues to become siloed to this officer. Ideally, the focus of such an officer would not entirely be casework-focused, and would instead be dedicated to building postgraduate capacity, or “postgrad proofing” the union, similar to how the sabbatical Leas-Uachtarán don Ghaeilge expanded the role of the Irish language within the union.

Questions also remain as to the role the PWO will play in this new era of postgraduate representation within the union. The PWO has seen renewed attention with the establishment of diplomatic relations between the PWO and AMLÉ,^{xxxii} with the Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) and Irish Research Staff Association (IRSA) also expressing renewed interest in the struggles of postgraduate researchers.^{xxxiii}

Ultimately, only time will tell as to how postgraduates will fare in this new era of TCDSU-AMLCT.

Research and Development

The work carried out in the integration of postgraduates within an undergraduate students' union is largely foundational work, as no such precedent exists within Ireland, due to the remaining two postgraduate students' unions, [RCSI PGSU](#) and [UL PSU](#) still remaining separate entities. Postgraduate sabbatical officers had already existed in other unions, namely in [UCDSU](#) and [QSU](#), and so it is possible some inspiration was taken from them for implementing this work.

Staff and students were involved in this work, as, following the derecognition of the GSU, TCD began working directly with TCDSU-AMLCT to organise postgraduate representation, by providing the SU with access to the postgraduate mailing list, committee lists, class lists and funding to establish postgraduate representative structures. TCDSU-AMLCT has also strengthened its relationship with the [Trinity Postgraduate Advisory Service](#) since the derecognition of the GSU.

This service established in 2009, and provided independent and confidential support, guidance and advocacy to postgraduates. Prior to the derecognition of the GSU, minimal interaction existed between the Postgraduate Advisory Service and TCDSU-AMLCT, however there was a close relationship between the service and the GSU. Following the derecognition of the GSU, TCDSU-AMLCT inherited this relationship, with the primary interactions being with the Welfare and Education Officers of TCDSU-AMLCT, due to their being the main casework officers.

The typical work carried out between the service and TCDSU-AMLCT entails student assistance funds, short term loans and other financial supports, however the SU also defers more complex cases to the service, which may assist in the knowledge gap the often undergraduate sabbatical officers face when dealing with postgraduate casework. The service also previously provided training to postgraduate class representatives. It is expected that this relationship will deepen with the establishment of the sabbatical TCDSU-AMLCT Graduate Officer.

This project was of distinct relevance to the importance of the postgraduate voice, due to the representative gap left behind by the derecognition of the GSU. With the newly-established representative structures, it is hoped that postgraduate issues will be addressed more directly by TCDSU-AMLCT, increasing the efficacy of their advocacy in this remit. Without the GSU, postgraduate students and researchers had no direct input into College decision-making processes, or indeed the representative channels of TCDSU-AMLCT, and so with the re-establishment of these structures under one representative body, this will hopefully improve working relationships with the College going forward.

Action	Brief Description
Establishment of the PGR Forum	This Forum acted as a vital organising point for postgraduate researchers in TCD, showing the need for PGR-specific spaces in student organisations.
Establishment of a sabbatical Graduate Officer	In theory, sabbaticalising students' union officers leads to far increased representative capacity, however as this is a newly-created role, this is still an unproven position within TCDSU-AMLCT.
Collaborative and solidarity action	When the PWO was initially created, they were not sidelined by TCDSU-AMLCT and were instead key stakeholders involved in the development of the new representative structures, however currently their relationship with the SU is unclear.

Reflections on Engagement

Overall the project of postgraduate integration has had a mixed reception by the postgraduate community of Trinity College Dublin. This initiative emerged out of urgent necessity, due to the rapid decline and dissolution of the GSU, and so it was initiated by external forces, rather than by the community itself. Despite this, the postgraduate community rallied behind the SU to help develop a new representative structure within the union, however the implementation of it has left some uncertain as to how the integration will progress in future years. The dual representative remit of the Graduate Officer for PGR and PGT members may be an advantage for the overall organisation, however it may also create a precedent where the majority of PGR representation is being conducted by a non-researcher sabbatical officer. The structure of the PGR Forum is also highly focused on union officers, with minimal input from grassroots researchers and students. The implementation of faculty and school reps, but no per-year reps for PGRs may also create a representative gap.

Overall the process of postgraduate integration within TCDSU-AMLCT, while not perfect, may present a potential roadmap for other unions looking to integrate postgraduates, particularly PGRs into union activity.

Supporting Evidence and References

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- ii. [The Undecided Future of Postgraduate Representation in Trinity – The University Times](#)
- iii. [TCDSU Postgraduate Long-Term Representation](#)
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- v. [Sabbatical officer - Wikipedia](#)
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- vii. [GSU to Vote on Divesting From TCDSU – The University Times](#)
- viii. [TCDSU to Continue to Represent Postgraduates Even if GSU Divests – The University Times](#)
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- xii. [Postgraduates Express Concerns Over Future of Representation in College – The University Times](#)
- xiii. [The Undecided Future of Postgraduate Representation in Trinity – The University Times](#)
- xiv. [TCDSU Postgraduate Long-Term Representation](#)
- xv. [TCDSU Postgraduate Plebiscite 2023 Results - Press Release](#)
- xvi. [Postgraduates Vote to Establish New Union Bodies in College – The University Times](#)
- xvii. [Postgraduate students to be integrated into TCDSU – Trinity News](#)
- xviii. [TCDSU Council formally approves postgraduate integration into union – Trinity News](#)
- xix. [Explainer: The postgraduate representation referendum – Trinity News](#)
- xx. [Referendum to formalise postgraduate representation within the union passes – Trinity News](#)
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- xxii. <https://www.instagram.com/p/DRkR2LmjYj-/?igsh=MWhidnhmdm15Yjtdw==>
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