



Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

*Opening Remarks to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science on the General Scheme of the Higher Education Authority
(HEA) Bill, 2021*

Introduction

Thank you, Mr Chairman and members of the joint committee for this opportunity to participate in the pre-legislative scrutiny on the General Scheme of the Higher Education Authority Bill, 2021.

My name is Clare Austick and I am President of the Union of Students in Ireland. USI welcomes the published General Scheme and believes that, in general terms, it goes some way to meeting the needs of the Higher Education sector.

Head 8: Objects

USI welcomes the list of objects outlined within the Bill under Head 8, particularly **the inclusion of students' needs as a primary consideration for decisions within Higher Education**. USI firmly believes that a student's needs must remain the priority across the sector to ensure students receive the most meaningful & high-quality college and academic experience possible.

Head 9: General Functions

USI warmly welcomes the emphasis placed on student engagement, participation and student success in Head 9 on General Functions and supports the continuous endeavour towards a high-quality educational experience for students in higher education.

USI embraces the inclusion of the phrase to "promote, support, and fund excellent research". However, it is worrying that the challenges facing researchers in terms of precarity will not be covered in this legislation. Clear commitments to improving conditions for postgraduate students must be constructed and then upheld at HEI Governing Bodies & Authorities.

In addition, USI is gravely concerned about the “value for money” reference and believes it needs to be carefully considered to ensure the conversation does not diverge towards one of further marketisation of higher education.

Head 17: Membership of the Board of An tÚdarás

USI fully supports the appointment of a student representative of the national students’ union to An tÚdarás under Head 17.

Head 43: Engagement with Students

USI welcomes the commitment to promoting student engagement between students’ unions and designated HEI’s within the Bill under Head 43. This provides a statutory footing for the National Student Engagement Programme, an ongoing collaboration between An tÚdarás, USI and QQI.

Head 44: Student Forum

USI welcomes the provision of a Student Forum under Head 44. Having said that, the operational detail for this Forum is not outlined within the Bill. It is imperative that this detail is developed alongside local and national student representatives to ensure the success of this Forum.

Head 45: Student Survey

Head 45 provides for a student survey of students at both undergraduate and postgraduate level to be run. This is welcomed by USI as it is an important piece of work which captures the student voice and provides an evidence base for the development of future policy

Representation on GA

Under Head 77, Head 90 and Head 98 on the composition of Governing Authorities for Universities, Technological Universities and IOTs, USI welcomes the best practice framework to improve governance. However, we are concerned that there is no requirement of a specific numbers of students in each governing body outlined.

USI is also deeply concerned that there are no amendments to the NCAD Act, 1971 to resolve the challenges faced by NCADSU in being recognised as eligible to become student representatives on An Bord.

Head 81: [Universities Act 1997] Amendment of Section 28 (Composition of academic council)

Similarly with Head 81: USI is concerned that there is no required minimum number of students on Academic Councils.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is positive to see the emergence of a clear theme underpinning the bill which appears to recognise the importance and value of student representation, engagement and participation. The provisions in place are promising but they must not be

allowed to become a series of tick box exercises and must eventually translate into real, tangible, effective actions and outcomes for the student experience and quality of our colleges.

The ambition of USI is to improve the quality of higher education, increase access, participation and engagement across the sector. If the provisions detailed in the bill are practiced and fully implemented, I believe that progress can be made.

I would once again like to express my sincere thanks for this opportunity today. Go raibh míle maith agat.