



NEXT STEPS

for Teaching and Learning:

Moving Forward Together



Authentic Student Engagement in Decision-Making



National Student Engagement Programme
Clár Rannpháirtíochta Náisiúnta na Mac Léinn

This Insight reflects on the key themes of student voice and student engagement in decision-making, as well as associated cultures and practices of student partnership as Irish higher education emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic. It draws on reflections submitted by class representatives who participated in NStEP's academic representation project in April 2021. It is contextualised in Steps to Partnership (Figure 1).

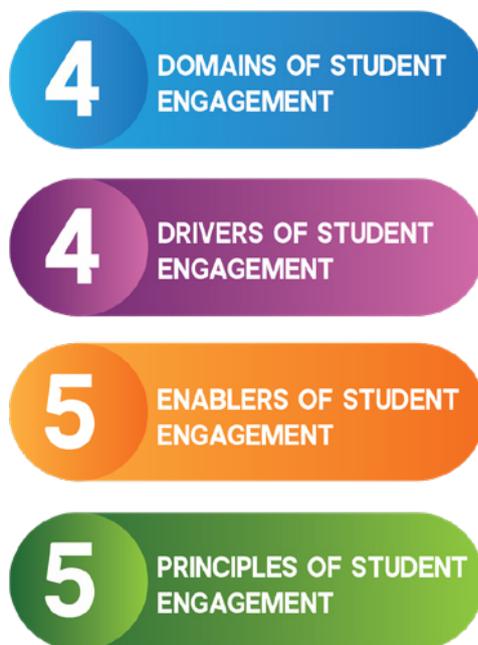


Figure 1: The 4-4-5-5 model from Steps to Partnership: A Framework for Authentic Student Engagement in Decision-Making. The full framework can be viewed at <https://studentengagement.ie/framework/>

Academic Representation during Covid-19

Background

In summer 2020 the NStEP Student Training Programme was revised, with new materials and learning tools devised for class representatives, as well as a range of additional training and development opportunities. These new opportunities ensured reps could access a suite of activities to enhance relevant skills, build capacity to achieve change in their roles, and develop a deeper understanding of higher education. In recognition for undertaking these activities, NStEP introduced a recognition and award system in the form of digital badges. When claiming a national Student Engagement Recognition Award for Academic Representation, reps were asked to complete a reflective report on their experiences. In total, 104 student academic representatives (otherwise referred to as 'class reps'), across 17 higher education institutions, agreed that their reports could be analysed. For the first time, NStEP was able to gather up-to-date, detailed, and relevant data on the experiences of students undertaking representative roles at the programme-level.

Class Rep Experiences

Class reps were asked to identify the challenges they faced in their roles during the academic year 2020/21, and, almost without exception, reps mentioned the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic before expanding on their own experiences and activities.

This academic year [2020/21] has been like no other before, students and lecturers alike have faced new and strange challenges and have had to adapt to an entire new system of online learning. With all these new experiences comes a huge wave of stress and insecurities from the students, and the role of class rep gained so much more importance than it once had.

Reps reflected on the multitude of challenges they faced in their roles, often heightened and complicated by the pandemic.

- **Communication** – Communication between peers and analysis of important information is often the result of channels created and maintained by class reps. Effective communication required reps to be able to access structured opportunities for engagement in decision-making processes.
- **Gathering, understanding, and analysing feedback from peers** – Ensuring anonymity and increasing student response rates to requests for feedback were often cited benefits of polling and surveying classmates, but reps identified the need to develop their skills in identifying and implementing these feedback strategies.
- **Liaison and collaboration with staff** – While reps had an overwhelmingly positive experience of interacting with staff, they reported a range of issues that could enhance their role as a point of liaison and as someone staff could collaborate with. Clarity on staff roles, ensuring the rep is accessible to staff, and strategies to support both proactivity and reactivity on emerging issues was key to effective rep-staff working relationships, built on collegiality.
- **Assessment and feedback** – A key touchstone issue that many reps worked on was assessment, including assessment practices, deadlines, and partnership activities, like negotiation of, and dialogue on, continuous assessments. This emphasises both the challenge of building partnerships on assessment practices, and the opportunities in doing so.
- **Teaching and Learning** – Reps reported a huge variety of areas where they directly worked on improvements and had a positive impact, including the use of the VLE, teaching and pedagogy, learning resources, accessibility and inclusion, as well as the role of the rep in encouraging peer engagement with the teaching and learning environment.



- **Peer Support** – Reps carried out many varied functions, including assisting in peer mentoring initiatives, organising additional supports, and supporting opportunities for student development and success. Reps overwhelmingly recognised the importance of their role as a signposter, but that this required support from their institutions to carry out effectively.
- **Social engagement** – Building and fostering connection across their peer groups was a priority for class reps in the 2020/21 academic year. Social engagement was an important factor in ensuring reps could create an
 - environment that encouraged active participation and feedback in the teaching and learning space itself.
 - **Supporting the Class Rep role** – Reps cited several key factors that made their roles more challenging, including lack of initial awareness of their roles, lack of understanding from staff/institutions, workload, and the volume of queries that they handle. Confidence and skills building were core to their success.

Class Rep Achievements

Class Reps were asked to describe and report their achievements during the academic year 2020-21 (Table 1).

Supporting communication and liaison with/between staff and students	49
Securing assessment and feedback changes/support	31
Gathering and analysing feedback from peers	28
Creating social engagement activities	26
Developing networks and friendships	26
Personal or professional development	25
Suggesting and creating solutions	24
Participating in wider lobbying and representation (inc. SU)	22
Committee and meeting attendance and contribution	20
Peer development and support	19
Participating in NStEP development opportunities	16
Improved T&L resources	14
Improved teaching methods	13
Enhancing student experience	12
Securing merchandise for classmates	12
Achieving re-election	10
Inclusive representation of diverse groups	8
Achieving awards or incentives	8
Signposting and peer support	8
Improved course content and/or structure	7
Progressed to another rep role	4
Undertaking additional training	4
Handling sensitive issues	4
Increased engagement from classmates	3
Increased knowledge of higher education	2

Table 1: Describe your achievements as a class rep during the 2020-21 academic year.



Enhancing the role of student academic representation

Overall, class reps indicated that their key support requirement was more **formalised and regularised meetings or committee structures**, providing reps and staff with a space to more actively communicate and collaborate on current issues. A lack of such structures resulted in a more disjointed approach to representation. When such opportunities were provided, often infrequently or towards the end of a semester or the academic year, reps and staff would discover issues of commonality, demonstrating the potential for greater practice-sharing that could enhance overall quality.

Where reps reported good practice in committees or formal meeting settings, this was usually departmental level **committees or councils that fed directly into both institutional and students' union structures**. However, most often, the ability of reps to share practice and to develop their understanding or ideas was through student rep forums or councils, which were run entirely by the students' union. A lack of corresponding forums between reps and staff required the students' union

often to assist or advise on resolving issues at the programmatic or departmental level.

Reps were overwhelmingly positive about their engagement with staff members particularly noting the openness of staff to resolving issues and developing solutions. Reps did raise the need for greater liaison and communication with staff members. Reps acknowledged the workload and difficulties encountered by staff, while also providing examples of how this had an impact on the resolution of smaller issues and their ability to allay student frustrations.

While evidence of partnership emerged in the data, reps listed a range of ways in which their roles could be better communicated and understood by both staff and students. A range of **opportunities for better visibility of the role, as well as greater emphasis on class rep development** could ensure that the already existing rep systems can be better utilised to create environments of effective staff-student engagement (Table 2).

More formal and regular committees and meeting opportunities	36
Greater interaction and liaison with programme/module staff	31
Opportunities for rep networking and practice sharing	26
Clarification, awareness, and promotion of the rep role	26
Other training and workshops	24
Greater communication and feedback with/from staff/HEI	21
Enhanced students' union support and facilitation	17
Greater rep participation in wider students' union activities	15
Engagement with appropriately senior staff members	12
Networking and social engagement with classmates	12
Knowledge of HEI structures and policies	11
Use of communication and online tools	11
More NStEP training and development opportunities	10
Enhanced and inclusive representation of all peers	10
Support for use of surveys	10
Clear electoral system	7
Resources, guides, and templates	7
Rep involvement in solutions and co-creation/implementation of changes	7
Rep transitions and handover support	6
Workload and accessibility of the rep role	6
Staff with responsibility for academic representation	6
Increased incentives, rewards, and value of the role	6
Varied rep structures at different levels	5
Awareness, signposting, and collaboration with services	5
Peer support initiatives	1

Table 2: What could be improved in your college to ensure that class reps are able to play a greater role in student engagement?



Student partnership is an often-cited value and ethos in Irish higher education, but if it is to be an embedded and lived reality throughout policy and practice, it requires strategic focus, as well as a deeper analysis of what constitutes meaningful engagement in decision-making. The experiences of students actively working and volunteering their time to further this ethos is key to understanding the kind of action that is required.

References

National Student Engagement Programme (2021). *Steps to Partnership: A Framework for Authentic Student Engagement in Decision-Making*. <https://studentengagement.ie/framework/>

National Student Engagement Programme (2020). *Student Training Programme* [online]. <https://studentengagement.ie/resources-for-students/>

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