Steps to Partnership: Developing, Supporting, and Embedding a New Understanding for Student Engagement in Irish Higher Education.

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Abstract.

This reflective article outlines the development of *Steps to Partnership* (NStEP, 2021a), a new national framework for Irish higher education to support authentic student engagement in decision-making across four key domains – governance and management, teaching and learning, quality assurance and enhancement, and student representation and organisation. *Steps to Partnership* represents a reimagining of an earlier '*conceptual framework*' for student engagement in decision-making published by Ireland's Higher Education Authority in 2016. It reflects the evolution of understanding, policy, and practice at the national and institutional levels, as well as increasing emphasis on embedding meaningful student voice practices within decision-making at all levels. The co-authors reflect on the development of the new framework, particularly on efforts to co-create national understandings, as well as outlining some of the ways in which the newly published framework has begun to inform current and future endeavours to strengthen student engagement in decision-making.

Keywords: Conceptual framework; *Steps to Partnership*; Student engagement; Student

partnership.

1.   Introduction and context.

The The National Student Engagement Programme, known as NStEP, was established in 2016 by three partner organisations (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, Higher Education Authority, and Union of Students in Ireland) to enhance student engagement in decision-making across Irish higher education. On the same day the programme was launched, the Higher Education Authority working group report on *Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision-Making* was published with a '*conceptual framework*' of 10 principles, 3 domains, and 3 drivers of student engagement. As a result, NStEP was tasked with developing initiatives to realise the ambitions of the report, especially the firm commitment made to the concept of students as partners. During NStEP strategy consultation in 2019, sectoral feedback from both students and staff across various roles and institutions, indicated that the framework required revision in order to support more effective dialogue and collaboration on student engagement initiatives (NStEP, 2019).

2.   The HEA 'conceptual framework' and the role of NStEP.

The original '*conceptual framework*' for student engagement in decision-making (HEA, 2016) was developed from a literature review, as well as a consultation between the HEA working group members, key national stakeholders, institutional leaders, and students' union officers. It reflected the need for '*proactive institutional leadership*' and an '*active and welcoming approach to student engagement*' (p. viii), which primarily included senior management and elected student officers. A core underpinning narrative in the report and accompanying framework was '*the developmental model [that] perceives the student as a partner in a learning community*'. As a result, the Irish higher education sector firmly positioned itself as a model founded on student partnership, similar to long established policy in Scotland (sparqs, 2002). This model is in sharp contrast to perceptions, in practice or in culture, that would position students as consumers in a marketised version of higher education, particularly England, where UK government policy has increasingly '*valorised*' the customer approach (Bunce, 2017).

Consequently, the 3 drivers of the framework reflected this position, built on '*democratic citizenship*', a collectivist idea of who belongs to the '*learning community*', as well as cultures and practices crafted by nurturing the '*critical*' debate that higher education seeks to embody through academia, scholarship, and contribution to '*discursive democracy*' (HEA, 2016, pp. 8-11). The '*values-based*' 10 principles of student engagement (pp. 31-32) that emerged from the consultation and literature review aimed to capture the essence of the conditions that were required to nurture the institutional culture envisioned in the three drivers. These 10 principles were to be embedded by action across '*three domains of quality assurance, teaching and learning, governance and management, and the cross-cutting theme of capacity building and training*' (p. 32). It was NStEP that was subsequently tasked with supporting that capacity building and training through initiatives that could meet the challenges and opportunities of student engagement across the three domains.

During the 2017 to 2019 period, NStEP undertook 16 institutional analysis workshops with students and staff. The workshops guided participants through a card-sort exercise, with mixed groups of students and staff examining statements of student engagement practice, collectively deciding whether they agreed or disagreed that their institution had actioned the statement to some extent. Action plans were then developed from the findings of the card sort, with groups tasked with identifying the domains and principles of student engagement that applied. Feedback across the analysis workshops indicated that applying findings to the 10 principles was a particularly difficult, and often confusing, task.

In 2019 NStEP began to develop a new strategy, seeking to define a more ambitious vision for the programme. The consultation found that students and staff who had participated in NStEP activity since 2016 found that there was no common language for student engagement or partnership, and that in particular, the institutional analysis would have been strengthened if the 10 principles had been easier to navigate and understand. This reflects the '*chaotic*' understanding of terms like student engagement (Coates and McCormick, 2014) and the need for continual dialogue and collaboration to craft common frameworks. The new NStEP Strategy 2019-2021 therefore committed to crafting and reimagining the '*conceptual framework*' to ensure it was a more practical resource for the sector, as well as setting out a vision that clearly demonstrated the collective learning of the sector since the initial report was published (NStEP, 2019). In essence, the programme set out to make sense of the '*chaos*' in collaboration with a broader audience of students and staff.

3. Creating a new national framework for student engagement.

From the outset, it was agreed among national partners that the 2016 framework should be revised and reimagined, rather than begin from scratch. There was significant value identified in demonstrating the evolution of our sectoral approaches and understandings.

The new *Steps to Partnership* framework was crafted from numerous strands of activity:

- A review of the qualitative data from the strategy consultation in 2019.
- A qualitative analysis of the outputs of the student-staff institutional analysis workshops 2016-2019 to identify key themes, challenges, and enablers across institutions.
- A consultative '*Student Engagement Chat*' initiative using an innovative digital polling tool (NStEP and Opinion X, 2020).
- An updated literature review of student engagement and student partnership. Literature assessed was largely focused on concepts and theories of practice, rather than on literature that was primarily focused on individual initiatives or examples of specific practice. This reflected the issue of the proliferation of '*isolated case-study examples of small-scale*' initiatives where partnership often occurs (Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2017).
- A final public consultation process to seek student and staff views on a draft of the new framework, which particularly sought views on a new section on enablers of student engagement (NStEP, 2020).

These strands were brought together by the constitution of a mixed project team of students and staff, co-chaired by several students who work closely with NStEP. The full-time staff at NStEP supported the identification of data and literature, drafting and redrafting documentation, and providing administrative support. An international adviser with significant experience in student engagement and partnership work was also appointed.

3.1 Common understandings for student engagement.

Ideas of student engagement are hotly debated and discussed, indeed, '*we could define student engagement in any way we want*' (Finn and Zimmer, 2012). As Matthews et al (2019) contend, theorizing and conceptualisation is difficult, therefore NStEP took the approach of collaborating with the sector, recognising that '*language matters*', as Matthews reminds us.

The process of creating a revised national framework was designed to make sense of the '*disparate*' terms (Bryson, 2014) across international literature and practice, taking a dialogic and consultative approach to understand the views and experiences of those working and learning in Irish higher education.

A core debate in higher education is on the use of terms like '*engagement*' or '*engages students*', which are often unsubstantiated in literature with no concept of how that engagement is occurring or viewed (Bryson, 2014). Previously divergent ideas of engagement with learning itself or for the purposes of enhancing the learning experience, are increasingly viewed through the common lens of student partnership - for example, the Healy et al (2014) report for the UK Higher Education Academy, and Bovill's (2019) typology for co-creation in teaching and learning. The Irish focus on '*student engagement in decision-making*' (HEA, 2016) specifically situates NStEP within the space of student voice. However, NStEP needed to address these potentially conflicting conceptualisations to address a seeming lag between theory and practice.

The project team tasked with shaping a revised framework particularly discussed the issues of tokenistic student engagement practice, reflecting a core question, whether student engagement is automatically a positive? (Zepke, 2014). Any new definitions for use in the Irish context had to clearly challenge this assumption and set out understandings that would stand up to the scrutiny of criticality, allowing students and staff to assess whether their experiences were authentic examples of engagement and/or partnership.

As a result, the project team settled on a series of '*understandings*' for the terms *student voice*, *student engagement*, and *student partnership*. These understandings seek to provide a common set of definitions, without being definitive or prescriptive in nature, providing space for students, staff, and institutions to take '*steps to partnership… in a way that ensures that partnership is sustained'* (NStEP, 2021a, p.5).

The three understandings (see NStEP, 2021a, p.5) are 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.

The concept of student voice set out in *Steps to Partnership* is rooted in Dewey's 1916 theory of '*democratic education*' in which all parties have a right to have a say (Lowe and El Hakim) and the '*HEI as a site of democratic citizenship*' (HEA, 2016). The understanding of student engagement in the framework seeks to clarify the preposition of '*in decision-making'*, shifting the focus on student voice to how students are involved in, and participate in, processes that influence how decisions are made. Subsequently, the understanding of student partnership highlights the need to '*re-balance power dynamics*' to create a collaborative environment. The three understandings, taken together, are positioned to elevate student voice, foster a '*collective*' culture of decision-making, and reflect that partnership is enacted within '*an ethic of reciprocity*' (Cook-Sather and Felten, 2017, p. 181).

3.2 The 4-4-5-5 model.

Building from the original framework's three drivers of student engagement, three domains of student engagement, and ten principles of student engagement, the project team sought to craft a revised framework that created a coherent picture of practice and theory, while generating something more memorable for common usage. What emerged was the 4-4-5-5 model of four drivers, four domains, five principles, and five enablers of student engagement. The model, coupled with the new understandings, provides a common vocabulary, identifies key areas where student engagement and partnership occurs in Irish institutions, and how it might be supported and meaningfully achieved. From this perspective, it can be viewed as a launch pad for deeper exploration.

Figure 1: Steps to Partnership framework, with the 4-4-5-5 model, underpinned by common understandings.
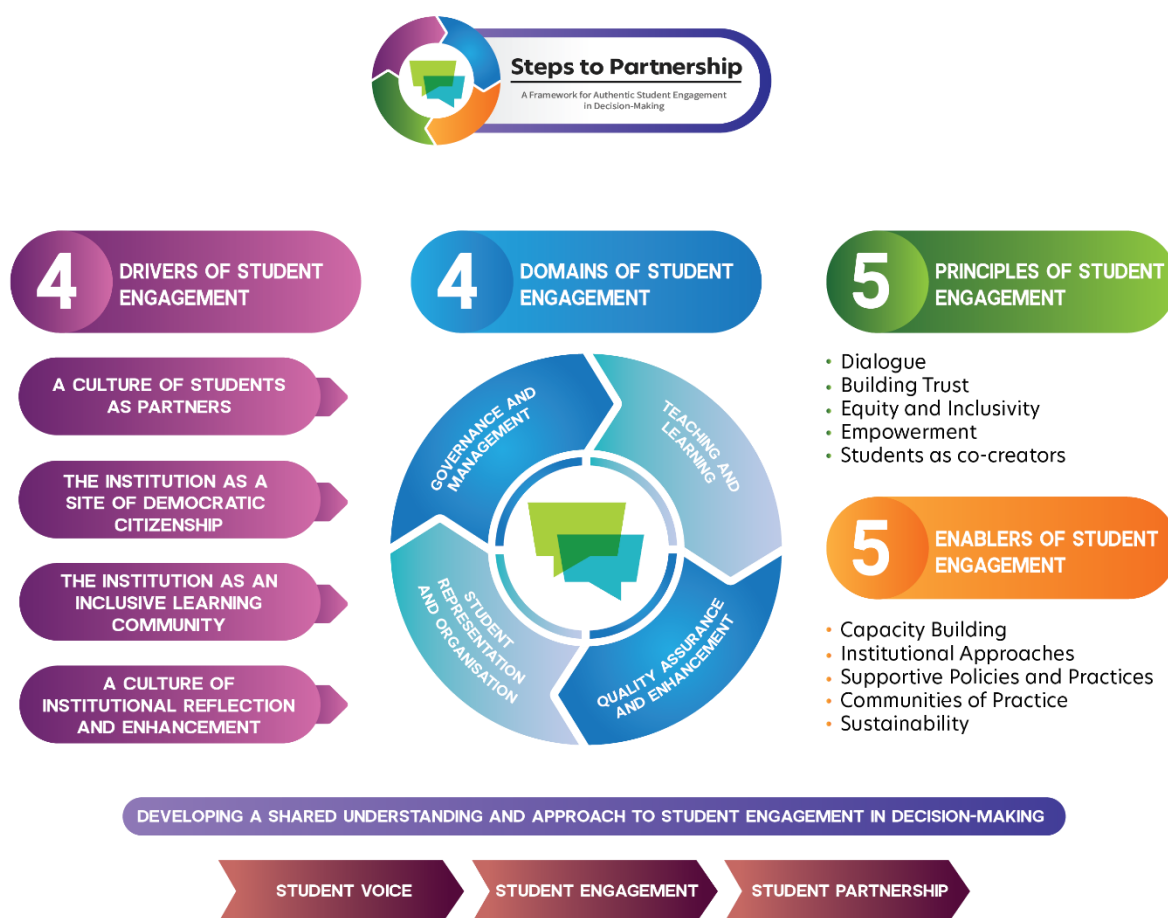
3.2.1 The four drivers of student engagement.

The four drivers of student engagement are a slight reworking of the original three, with the addition of '*a culture of students as partners*'. At the heart of the drivers is the recognition of the need for a cultural underpinning to expressed ethos:

'*Most colleges and universities have engagement as a priority in their institutional mission statement, but it requires intentionality, diplomacy, and (for lack of a better term) grit to trans-late engagement into dominant models [of practice]*'. (Felten and Lambert)

A core theory in both the original and revised frameworks is a sense of belonging to a wider learning community, and that students' experiences and perceptions are shaped by how the

'*academic*' and '*social*' spheres relate or integrate. Each level or aspect of the learning environment - modular, programmatic, institutional, etc – has an effect on that sense of belonging. Wenger (1999) summarises that there is a need to strengthen student perception of belonging to a community of practice as part of their '*learning trajectory'*, while S*teps to Partnership* underpins this community through a lens of '*developing students*' agency and empowerment through student–staff partnerships' (Abbot, 2017 cited in Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill, 2019).

3.2.2 The four domains of student engagement.

In *Steps to Partnership*, the existing three domains are joined by the domain of *student representation and organisation.* This recognises the need to address a lack of common understandings and confusion on the role of student representation (Flint et al, 2017), and that the need for '*conscious, coordinated decisions between the institution and students' union on the purpose of the [student] rep system*' (McCarthy, 2020) cannot be side-lined if partnership is to be sustained. Indeed, collaborative design of initiatives or schemes that demonstrate student partnership '*predominantly*' involve students' unions (Mercer-Mapstone and Bovill) and considering that the majority of NStEP's efforts involve capacity building of the '*leadership capabilities of students*' (NStEP, 2019), it was imperative that student representation was visible at the heart of the framework.

The framework provides greater opportunity to examine the impact of the domains of governance and management, quality assurance and enhancement, and teaching and learning on the predominant and prevailing cultures that can either support or suppress authentic student engagement. There remains potential for '*tension*' between the goals of partnership in higher education and the effects of consumerist discourse or '*transactional exchange'* (Tomlinson, 2016) across these domains, so institutionally focused, joined-up approaches allow for scalability of good practice, while also recognising competing pressures and the need for measurability.

The domains also provide more opportunity to understand how student engagement and the need for voice and partnership within '*design, review, and change within learning, teaching and assessment*' (Healy et al, 2014) can complement the wider need for student engagement outside of the classroom or learning environment itself.

3.2.3 The five principles of student engagement

The five principles of student engagement represent a significant revision from the original framework. While reducing the number of principles (down from ten) was seen as important, it was not the primary aim – instead, it was recognised from sectoral consultation, discussions, and workshops, that the principles needed to present a clear narrative that students and staff could follow together, providing a genuine roadmap to evaluate the authenticity of engagements. The original ten principles did not disappear, rather they morphed into a more memorable and illuminating set of principles. The new principles are (i) dialogue, (ii) building trust, (iii) equity and inclusivity, (iv) empowerment, and (v) students as co-creators (NStEP, 2021a, pp.10-11). The principles, considered alongside the drivers and domains, recognise the '*whole lives of students*', such as perceptions of the institution and the learning experience, communication and discourse, supportive networks, participation, and a sense of belonging and community, while '*put[ting] meaningful human connections at the centre*' (Bryson, 2014) of their experiences with staff. This also emphasizes the significant body of work to understand the behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris, 2004 cited in Trowler, 2010; Pickford, 2016) of students both individually and collectively within the learning community.

3.2.4 The five enablers of student engagement.

The five enablers were only initially published as themes in late 2020, and after sectoral consultation were designed to address the major challenges raised by students and staff. Essentially, the enablers are an attempt to create opportunities for action arising from the most pressing challenges to meaningful student engagement in the Irish sector. A key challenge identified by the sector, and prominent throughout the literature, is that student (and staff) turnover or transcience prevents sustainable practices (Shaw and Atvars, 2018). The enablers that emerged from the project team deliberations are (i) capacity building, (ii) institutional approaches, (iii) supportive policies and processes, (iv) communities of practice, and (v) sustainability. In particular, the enablers offer practical suggestions that ensure partnerships can be crafted in a way that isn't restrictive or formulaic (Frison and Melacarne, 2017) and provides '*legitimacy*' (Matthews, 2019) to student engagement work throughout the institution.

Critically, the framework does not '*ignore issues of power and resistance*' (Seale et al, 2015, p. 550), encouraging openness and transparency that does not pre-determine values, opinions, or outcomes. Instead, the enablers focus on ways to incorporate student expertise (Little,

2011), challenge traditional norms (Ntem and Cook-Sather, 2017) through positive disruption, and in particular to respond to Chng's call to challenge the perception that student partnership '*is difficult to forge*' and results in '*staff leading students*' (Chng, 2020).

4.   Reflections – what did we learn and what should we do with the framework?

Below are two personal reflections, one from a student co-chairperson of the project team that created the framework and one from a staff member supporting the project team. These reflections focus on experiences and observations of co-creation on the project team. Both individuals have provided further reflections and contributions as co-authors in other aspects of this reflective article.

4.1 Student reflection on the co-creative experience.

"*The overall experience of chairing the project team was an eye-opening one, delving into aspects of higher education I had never thought to consider before, and this was in large part due to the balance between staff partners and other student leaders with vastly different experiences to my own that we had on the group.*

There was a consistent respect from both staff and students, and we quickly moved away from the mentality of "us vs them", to a mentality of "we are all in this together" with the aim of enrichment of the higher education experience as a whole.

The views of each individual were treated with an equal weight of respect. While there were many disagreements and debates throughout the process, no one ever disregarded someone's opinion. I believe that this project is a key example of how partnership itself can work - and work effectively."

4.2 Staff reflection on the co-creative experience.

"*I think perhaps the student chairs and others might be better positioned to reflect on some key questions to give deeper thought to the issue of co-creation. For example, how did students involved in the process feel during development [of the framework], and, perhaps more importantly, how do they feel now after the framework has been launched? Do they feel as if they are still a part of the conversation and involved in future work surrounding the framework*

- or would they want to be? From a staff/consultant perspective, what was it like to work with students as co-creators, and how did it shape attitudes towards this type of work in the future? From my perspective, I think it was of great benefit that NStEP student trainers were involved in the process. It has certainly allowed them to go into the training space and curate conversations on student engagement with peers in a more nuanced and engaging way."

4.3 Utilising the framework for enhancement activities.

As part of preparing this reflection, the authors considered both the co-creative experience (4.1 and 4.2 above) as well as the need to put the framework to good use across the sector. A primary aim of the framework was to support '*further evolution*' of student engagement (NStEP, 2021a, p.1) as well as representing a firm commitment from NStEP to develop new resources and initiatives to support the framework (p.15). As part of the publication of the new framework, NStEP also published a toolkit to support collaborative workshops and exercises across the four domains of student engagement (NStEP, 2021c). This toolkit had initially been produced for the delivery of a '*Cultures of Partnership*' workshop with Dublin City University (DCU) and DCU Students' Union (DCUSU) just before the pandemic caused the shutdown of on-campus activity in March 2020. That workshop informed the development of a new DCU Student Partnership Framework (DCU QPO, 2021). It is envisioned, by utilising *Steps to Partnership*, that similar activities and initiatives can be undertaken and supported through each stage of development with other institutions and students' unions.

Steps to Partnership may provide an opportunity to promote good practice, as well as more evenly distribute activities across a diverse sector. It may also provide an opportunity for networks of champions and practitioners to share and advance effective ways to promote authentic student engagement practices within their own spheres of influence, particularly with those who have most influence over how decisions are made. The framework could also support more meaningful exploration of impact and evidence of enhancement that truly elevates the student voice within and across institutions. Key to success will be avoiding the transmission or '*imparting*' of knowledge, rather that knowledge is explored, interpreted and 'co-constructed' in a myriad of ways (Mercer-Mapstone and Mercer, 2017; Abbott, 2017) with the support of the framework.

Key to realising the enablers of student engagement is to foster more connection between both national and institutional approaches with the often more isolated 'small-scale' (Kuh,

2007) and whole-class pedagogical practices, which are often explored to rebalance the lack of involvement or wider reach of students beyond their programme (Bovill et al. 2016; Moore-Cherry et al. 2015). For a national project such as NStEP, gaining a greater insight in to 'on-the-ground' practice, particularly with staff involvement, would begin to complement the work of the programme, since 2016, to train and engage with student representatives at the programme-level. As a result, further guidance and support, that is more applicable and needs-based for those working on the coalface of engagement can be produced from the national-level, ultimately generating more tangible recognition for individuals, groups, and institutions that are practising partnership, not just because of the framework itself.

Students, staff, and policy makers need opportunities to explore the framework, and envisage what it means in their own contexts and roles, especially to examine and avoid potentially tokenistic practices or empty rhetoric (Wijaya Mulya, 2018). Building from previous experience with institutional analysis, NStEP can support the use of the framework for students and staff to come together to self-evaluate current practice, as well as consider new possibilities. Given the pressure of often competing demands on students and staff, this may require encouragement and incentivisation, and will require thoughtful attention to ensure that the student voice is not misappropriated (Macfarlane and Tomlinson, 2017) in order to meet an increasing expectation within higher education. As a result, clear and practical examples of best practice and aspirational models of student engagement/partnership need to be developed to bring the framework to life. It is important that these include strategies and actions that can be easily implemented and applied in a variety of contexts, providing clear evidence of the benefits associated with enhancing student engagement and partnership for *all* members of the learning community.

5.   The steps to partnership open course for professional development.

In tandem with the work of the project team charged with revising and redeveloping the framework, a smaller project team began the work of creating an open course in conjunction with the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning. National open courses are designed to provide a suite of opportunities for higher education staff, primarily those who teach, to undertake short courses with 25-hours of learner effort. Learning outcomes and course aims are aligned to the National Professional Development Framework (NFETL, 2016).

NStEP's open course was ultimately aligned with the *Steps to Partnership* framework and was delivered in autumn 2021 to staff from 19 institutions, with a short facilitator course in January 2022. The course took a flipped classroom approach, with weekly video content, individual activities, and group activities hosted on the National Forum's virtual learning environment. The open course introduces concepts, theories, challenges, and opportunities for student engagement, encouraging participants to draw out ideas and issues that informed the sectoral creation of the framework (Ní Bheoláin and Hassan, 2021). A key aim of the open course, targeted primarily at staff participation, was to address the dilemma that '*staff typically invite students to join the work [of partnership]*' which '*raises difficult questions of how they determine whom they will invite and which students have the capacity to contribute*' (Bovill et al., 2016). Participants were supported to explore this challenge, as well as inclusive practices, ultimately preparing a student engagement and partnership plan, aligned to the *Steps to Partnership* framework, for their own professional contexts.

While it is too early to make firm conclusions on the effectiveness of the course in promoting the framework, initial participant feedback has been positive. A team of students and staff who were involved as course developers, facilitators, and participants undertook an initial review of the course, which also provided a significant opportunity to consider the application of the concepts within the framework as part of a sectoral initiative to embed those same concepts in practice. Course materials and pedagogical approaches will be revised for the next iteration, but other ideas to support the framework have emerged, such as greater opportunities for staff to network and access practical case studies for their own roles. Participants, both staff and students, will be encouraged to promote the framework and good practices in student engagement, while opportunities for further assistance to past participants will be identified by NStEP. Furthermore, more bitesize professional development opportunities are now a key aim for NStEP going forward, which may encourage future participation in more time-consuming opportunities like the open course.

6.   Conclusions – the next steps toward student-staff partnership.

The emergence of a '*new normal*' and a greater focus on ideas of partnership and co-creation in Irish higher education during the pandemic (Hassan et al, 2020), has compounded the need to realise new potential in student engagement efforts. This has been further emphasised with

the significant focus on student engagement within the new Higher Education Authority Bill (DFHERIS, 2021), due to pass into law in late 2022. This will require NStEP to continue to grow our work with national bodies to incorporate authentic student engagement and partnership as an integral component of initiatives across the sector.

The new framework provided a significant opportunity to co-create a national resource that not only communicates key theories and understandings but can also provide a pivot around which to craft initiatives and projects of interest to both students and staff in the pursuit of a more democratic and inclusive learning community, with meaningful engagement and strong partnerships at the core. Arguably, while far from a perfect roadmap, *Steps to Partnership* provides a timely national focal point to spotlight concepts and examples of student engagement culture and practice, promoting a renewed vision of authenticity that can support a thoughtful, open, and collaborative approach to higher education decision-making in Ireland.

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