

# ***The establishment of a national student assembly in the National Forum: Student partnership in action.***

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## **Abstract.**

In 2020, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education in Ireland, hereafter referred to as the National Forum, established a student assembly comprised of student associates from every Higher Education Institution (HEI) in Ireland. The aim of the assembly is to reinforce the importance of student engagement and partnership as core enablers of student success in Irish higher education. The student assembly mirrored the existing staff associate assembly in the National Forum. This article outlines the rationale for the establishment of the assembly; the recruitment process and the practical arrangements for establishing a student assembly; engagement activities and topics covered; and finally the lessons learned from the operation of the assembly.

The operation of a national student assembly was made easier by the move to online meetings as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The diverse make-up of the assembly, interactive and engaging activities, peer-led activities, and authentic dialogue were key factors in the success of the assembly.

**Keywords:** Inclusion; Student engagement; Student partnership; Student success; Student voice.

## **1. Introduction.**

The National Forum is the national body responsible for leading the way for teaching and learning enhancement in the Irish Higher Education sector. The National Forum is a collaborative institution engaging all stakeholders who teach, learn and shape policy within the

sector to ensure teaching and learning is a core value to be considered. Established in 2013, the National Forum adopted the mission “*as a national body, to lead the enhancement of teaching and learning in partnership with students, staff and leaders in Irish higher education to develop an inclusive, collaborative and innovative culture that maximises learning impact for the success of all students*”. National Forum priorities are regularly evaluated to ensure its priority areas are reflective of the current nature of the Higher Education sector. A strategy launched in 2019 set out four main priority areas for the National Forum: professional development, teaching and learning in a digital world, enhancement within and across disciplines, and student success. As a result of these priority areas, several positive outcomes have been achieved such as the development of many open courses for those across the sector to avail of, a guide to enabling policies, a national resource hub, a student assembly and a toolkit for embedding student success in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The National Forum recently moved under the Higher Education Authority, and a new strategy will be developed in 2022 for a sustainable future. This strategy will reflect on prior work done by the National Forum and the changes over the past number of years within the sector to move forward towards leading positive change in Irish higher education.

## **1.1 The rationale for the creation of a student assembly.**

A wider discussion around students as partners arose during a review period at the National Forum in 2017/18. The term student partnership was often referenced as a core value in work carried out; however, a wider discussion was encouraged about how best the concept of student partnership could not only be referenced but embedded in the National Forum's day-to-day activities. There were active examples of student engagement such as a working partnership with The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) and student input into National Forum projects, however, there was an appetite for a more embedded level of student partnership in the ongoing work of the National Forum. It was believed a more strategic approach was warranted, however, questions arose as to how to meaningfully embed students as partners as opposed to being tokenistic in its approach. The National Forum in developing its new strategy believed not only that students should be referenced throughout, but that they should be a central component. Therefore, in a key opportunity for change, student success was made a priority area in the National Forum's 2019-21 strategy. It was believed that all pathways in the sector were linked to student success and therefore, student success needed to be a concept considered by all. While the concept of student success had been touched on

in previous work carried out in collaboration with the sector, there was a key opportunity to really embed the idea of student partnership here given that it was included in the strategic goals of the Forum. This did raise the question however as to how this could be meaningfully embedded? '*Student success*' gave the concept momentum in the sector however more needed to be done not only to educate staff on the importance of including students in the work of the individual institutions but also, in terms of how student partnership was recognised at sectoral level. In the National Forum, a system of student interns was established based on similar models in the UK which gave students the opportunity to contribute to the day-to-day workings of the National Forum. Given the success of this system of student interns, there was an evident benefit from this direct level of student partnership which subsequently led to the establishment of the student assembly as a structured process for engaging with students.

## **1.2 Recruitment and practical arrangements.**

The role of a student associate is to support teaching and learning enhancement both within their institutions and at a national level by providing their views and opinions on higher education teaching and learning activities and developments. Student associates work collaboratively to bring a strong student voice, informed by their lived student experience, to national teaching and learning enhancement in higher education.

Cook-Sather and colleagues (2014) argued that engaging students in discussions about learning and teaching enhances understanding of learning and teaching processes, increases motivation and enhances learning and teaching experiences. The positive outcomes for the National Forum in establishing a systematic process for engaging with the student voice and the lived student experience were evident. Establishing a clear understanding and process that would allow the student associates to also benefit from the role was a key consideration in the development of the student associate assembly. Felten and colleagues (2016) suggested that experiences with the potential for significant impact should "*prompt students to engage in challenging work, interact with peers and mentors in meaningful ways, and reflect on what is being learned*" (p. 23). Therefore, creating opportunities for students to learn and apply their new knowledge was a key consideration when developing the role of the student associates. As Felten et al. continued, "*When these elements are prioritised in the design and implementation of an educational activity, they allow many experiences in and out of the classroom to have positive impacts on student learning*" (Ibid). To assist the student associates to integrate these learning experiences into their studies and their future

employment, the student associate review process at the end of each academic year follows the principles of a University of Iowa (2009) initiative called Iowa GROW (Guided Reflection On Work). This reflective style of review focuses on how the role fits in with a student's academic studies, how work-based learning assists their studies and vice versa, and how learning can be carried and integrated into future roles.

National Forum student associates are recruited currently from all Higher Education Institutions across Ireland. At present there are 46 student associates recruited from 32 HEIs. Student associates are recruited through a process coordinated by the student success team in the National Forum. Recruitment is carried out publicly through the National Forum website accompanied by an extensive social media campaign, as well as targeted recruitment through collaboration with institutional representatives. Student associates are hired for a period of one academic year, with a review process undertaken at the end of the year determining whether a student associate may return for the following year in their role. Student associates are hired for a maximum of 50 hours per academic year, averaging at 25 hours per semester and are remunerated accordingly for their time. At the early assemblies of the year, student associates were asked to consider a governance terms of reference document and were given the opportunity to feedback into this before agreeing to the conditions as set out within the document. There is also a terms of engagement document written and agreed upon by the student associates as a collective to ensure as a group they are respectfully interacting with one another during the course of their work (as discussed in more detail below).

### **1.3 Diverse representation in the student assembly.**

In the recruitment of student associates to the student assembly, it was important that the assembly reflected the diversity of students in higher education. In the promotional material for recruitment, it was noted that, "*The student associate recruitment process will be mindful of the diversity of learners within the student population*" (National Forum, 2021).

Students in Irish higher education are not the homogenous group they once were. According to HEA statistics (Higher Education Authority, 2021), 18% of newly enrolled students report having a disability, 7% of new students are mature students, 6% enter higher education from Further Education, 4% enter via the HEAR access route, 21% report an ethnicity other than White: Irish, and the number of non-EU International students has doubled since 2009.

The positions were advertised via social media, institutional communications offices, and

students' unions. In order to attract student associates who reflected the diversity of the student population, contact was made with groups who represented and supported diverse students, such as AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access & Disability) and ICOS (Irish Council for International Students). The access and disability services within institutions were also asked to promote the opportunities to their student leaders and volunteers. The result was that the student assembly did represent a diverse cross-section of the Irish higher education student population.

The diversity of the disciplines represented in the assembly was also important. A role with the National Forum, around teaching and learning enhancement, is potentially more likely to attract applicants who wish to work in education in their future career, and students studying for teaching degrees brought their disciplinary knowledge to bear on discussions about feedback, inclusive teaching methods, and professional development. The diversity of the disciplines ensured that discussions brought in a variety of experiences. For example, the discussions on the impact of COVID-19 brought in the experience of students on work placement, teaching practice, those who were still working in laboratories and workshops, and those whose entire learning experience had moved online.

#### **1.4 Partnership with the Union of Students in Ireland (USI).**

The USI were active partners in the establishment and development of the student associate assembly. This partnership with the USI cemented the National Forum's commitment to the student voice, student engagement and partnership from the outset of the student associate assembly. The USI and in particular, the Vice President for Academic Affairs, have collaborated with the student success team at the key developmental stages of the student associate assembly including: the initial planning for the assembly, development of the first role descriptors, induction of new student associates, and the review process at the end of year one. While student associates were recruited from both USI affiliated and non-affiliated institutions, the USI also supported the recruitment of the student associates at a national and regional level encouraging their member organisations to promote the role to class reps, student leaders and volunteers as noted above.

The partnership also extends to the student associate assembly meetings. The USI were represented at and contributed to each assembly, providing an update on USI activities, such as campaigns and events, and also actively encouraging the student associates to participate

in USI consultation processes. The USI VP for Academic Affairs in 2020/21 also contributed to the capacity building session related to effective feedback, sharing their experience of contributing the student perspective on review panels. The partnership was further reflected at the 2021 USI Student Achievement Awards, when the 2021 Teaching Hero Awards, a collaborative initiative between the National Forum, USI and students' unions across the country, were announced at the event.

### **1.5 Impact of COVID-19.**

The student assembly was initiated during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic had many negative impacts on higher education, the restrictions ensured that alternative methods of operating the assembly were considered. The pandemic forced the operation of the assembly to run fully online in its first year and this showed one of the very beneficial aspects of the online realm. Given the extensive number of student associates registered from HEIs from all corners of the country, the logistics of organising physical meetings would have been very difficult, given that our students are learners with course commitments. However, operating the assembly fully online allows a wider range of people to instantly log on and attend, without the pressure of travel obligations to a central location. Although the assembly has only ever existed online, it is expected that attendance rates would not be as high should it move to a face-to-face format. The positive attendance rates at the online meetings, on two-week intervals, allow for increased engagement with the student associates. This fosters a networking environment for the students to engage with each other and with guest speakers. Utilising online platforms has also allowed the trial of a number of functionalities over the course of meetings to see what works best. Breakout rooms allow for networking and a more focused discussion in smaller peer groups while using platforms such as Mentimeter or Wooclap allow students to anonymously feedback on topics of conversation. Interactive documents also allow collaborative peer led discussions. The student assembly has also been able to explore more informal ways of peer interaction through WhatsApp group chats and Slack. This has allowed student associates to build friendships outside of the assembly further enhancing the social side of the student experience, particularly in a hybrid learning environment. The online learning environment also facilitated the use of assistive technology such as closed captions.

## **1.6 The structure of the student associate role and assembly meetings.**

The student associate role is semi-structured. The structure comes from the student assembly meetings, which are held fortnightly on Zoom throughout the academic year. Each of the assemblies were ninety minutes in duration and followed a similar format including opportunities for capacity building, peer engagement and co-creation during the meeting.

Capacity building was facilitated by the National Forum team, colleagues from across the sector and through peer-led sessions (discussed in the section below). In addition to areas identified by the student success team in which the student associates needed development to carry out their role, for example, providing effective feedback in a review process, the student associates were asked at the end of each term the areas they would like to expand their knowledge and skills. Through these sessions, the students highlighted an interest in capacity building across a wide range of areas, including some not directly related to their roles as student associates but related to the experiences of their fellow students including access to education and inclusive learning.

This drive for understanding the experiences of other students was, in part, facilitated by peer-to-peer engagement during the assemblies. As noted above, the student associate recruitment process was mindful of the diversity of the student population and institution type across the sector. As such, the peer-to-peer engagement opportunities within the assemblies gave rise to diverse conversations that required the students to think beyond their own experience of higher education. These open, and sometimes challenging, conversations were possible through the adoption of the student associate terms of engagement, which the students co-created. The terms of engagement are agreed actions and behaviours that encourage and empower all the student associates to participate in the assemblies and the student associate role. The terms of engagement speak to respectful and open communication, respect for each other's flexible work schedules, collaboration and crediting each other's work. The template for the terms of engagement came from the HEA Innovation and Transformation funded initiative, 3Set Peer Led Student Transition Community of Practice (2020).

At least one peer-to-peer engagement activity was planned for each assembly. The student associates were encouraged to interact using Google docs and jamboards, interactive software such as Mentimeter, Wooclap and OpinionX.

For coherence, the assemblies also had a focus or theme, for example digital education. The digital education assembly included a capacity building session with the National Forum Educational Developer for Digital Education, a breakout room activity relating to the student associates' experiences of online learning during COVID-19, and an opportunity to share and discuss their views on what positive elements of learning online they would like to see maintained in post-COVID teaching and learning. This information fed into the National Forum Next Steps project. The focus of the assemblies were fluid enough to allow the work of an assembly to build on the previous one. For example, a peer-led session on accessibility was followed in the next assembly by a capacity building session on assistive technology delivered by AHEAD.

Feedback in the assemblies took many forms and, in keeping with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, it was varied even within any one assembly to be inclusive of all preferences. Students were invited to share their views over mic, in the chat function, through '*hold & shares*' during discussions. Typically, there were also opportunities for feedback/follow up after each assembly in the form of a google doc. This was particularly important for those who were unavailable to attend assembly as they were still able to contribute to peer activities. As noted above, there was also an opportunity for the student associates to reflect and provide formal feedback on the role.

During the academic year 2020-21, the student associates also contributed to three significant National Forum initiatives: the 2021 Teaching Hero Awards and the development of the Embedding Student Success: A Guiding Framework (2020) and the subsequent, Seven Cs for Embedding Student Success: A Toolkit for Higher Education Institutions (2021). The 2021 Teaching Heroes were a collaborative initiative with the USI, showing another strength to the partnership. Over 900 staff that teach were recognised as Teaching Heroes in 2021.

In terms of the flexible elements of their role, and depending on their availability, the student associates were encouraged to engage in National Forum supported, national enhancement activities such as the VIT&L Week (Valuing Ireland's Teaching and Learning) events. They provided valuable student feedback at both initial and mid-way funding reviews for the National Forum Strategic Alignment of Teaching and Learning Enhancement (SATLE) initiatives. The student associates were also strongly encouraged to engage in local enhancement activities too in partnership with their local teaching and learning teams and students' union / student representatives. Examples of these activities include local SATLE



initiatives, internal teaching reviews and awards, regional projects (e.g. HEI collaborative projects such as an Assessment COP and SEDA (Staff and Educational Development Association) projects). While these opportunities vary by institution, local enhancement activities are very important for linking the students into their institutions and raising awareness of teaching and learning enhancement amongst students.

The semi-structured nature of the role has another two significant advantages, firstly, the regularity of the assemblies affords the opportunity to address topical issues as they arose and secondly, there was capacity for the students to engage in once-off/short-term projects within their institution efficiently, because of the structures and connections (National Forum Staff Associates and SU/student representatives) in place.

### **1.7 Peer-led activities.**

As noted above, regular feedback was sought from the student assembly on topics that were relevant to their lived experience as students. This feedback shaped the agenda for the assemblies and in response, many external speakers were brought in to lead discussions on relevant topics. However, there were a number of times when individual student associates identified topics on which they could present and lead the discussion. Two sessions stand out in particular. In the first instance, a student assembly member who was hearing-impaired presented on the use of assistive technologies and tools that would create a more inclusive learning and living environment for students with disabilities. Practical tips and ideas were discussed that would ensure students with disabilities could engage more with learning activities and also social activities such as clubs and societies. In the second example, two student associates who were also trainers with the National Student Engagement Programme (NSTEP) delivered an interactive and engaging session on how to deliver constructive feedback to staff on the academic programme. The student assembly was highly engaged for both sessions, and it provoked significant discussion and learning for all involved. At the end of the year, the students identified these sessions as being particularly useful and there was significant support for further peer-led sessions.

## **2. Feedback from student associates.**

The National Forum student assembly was established in October 2020, and has now been in operation for eighteen months, which is sufficient time to reflect on the benefits and challenges

involved in operating the assembly. We asked our student associates to reflect on the value of the forum and what benefit it had been to them, and their conclusions are below.

*From the very beginning, my time as a student associate has taught me so much and I am so very grateful for the opportunity to have my voice heard by so many engaging, inclusive, and important people in the field of teaching and learning in higher education and beyond. My return to education came with a change in role for me; I came from retail management where I was very much used to hosting interviews and so I can't tell you how strange it felt to be attending one this year for a change; but from the word go, everyone in the National Forum has been so welcoming and helpful. I thoroughly enjoy giving my somewhat thick Cork accent and voice to, what I feel, is a largely underrepresented group, within campus life, of lone parents returning to higher education, and the National Forum has really given me space to shine a light on all those issues which I feel are not only pertinent to this minority but to mature student populations all over the country. The National Forum student assembly has given me such fun and innovating ways of being involved in informing those who teach and learn what the student perspective is all about in 2021; it is about education for all, it is about inclusivity, it is about being proactive and standing up for those things which are most important to you and to your university community. I have loved every minute of working with the 'Student Success' team, as well as every other member of the student assembly. This is a huge opportunity for me to learn so much and to give back as well and it is without doubt an opportunity that I do not intend to waste.*

[L.K., Applied Psychology student]

*From engaging with the National Forum student associate assembly as a student associate, I have experienced valuable learnings. It has been a pleasure to participate in lively discussions surrounding teaching and learning in Higher Education Institutions.*

*It was very beneficial to meet fellow student associates from a wide range of institutions. It has been interesting to compare our experiences and see how our Institutions differ on topics such as return to campus, blended learning, lecture recordings and assessments. I am impressed by the range of diversity in our group, for example, undergraduate, postgraduate, international and underrepresented students.*

*The student associate assemblies are fortnightly meetings with all student associates. It involves gathering valuable student perspectives on multiple topics. Breakout rooms are used*

*at each meeting to give students time to get to know each other and chat, something I have really enjoyed. Our facilitators welcome contributions, and promote a friendly, collaborative space, where all participants are encouraged to share. Student associates provide the student voice, directly supporting the work of the National Forum.*

*I am proud to be a member of this amazing group, as for me, it is a perfect example of authentic student-staff partnership. Student input is highly respected, and we are supported through the use of continuous feedback to our facilitators. Student associates are also encouraged to share National Forum news and opportunities, such as the Teaching Hero Awards and the Student Success Initiative. I have also had the opportunity to provide feedback on toolkits and surveys. I have had a brilliant experience in the role so far and I am excited to continue in semester 2.*

[M.W., Accounting & Business student]

*When I first saw the advertisement for student associates within the National Forum, I did not know what to expect or what I might be applying for, but when I researched a little further and successfully applied, it turned out that it was definitely a role for me. We regularly receive updates of the work that the National Forum are doing at our assemblies, which brings to light the additional work that goes on around enhancing higher education.*

*However, in a broader sense, very few students are aware of the work being done by the National Forum to improve the quality of higher education. Most of those are student associates past and present, who brought experience of teaching and learning in different subjects to assemblies. They also brought passion to improve the quality of teaching and learning and very often ideas and experiences from one area of learning could be translated to another. As a result, you are constantly presented with ideas that may not normally be on your radar.*

*For example, at a recent assembly, plans for semester two were discussed. One idea was events for students that have not yet had the opportunity to attend college in-person yet, which is not something that would be on the radar of a student who was in college before the COVID-19 situation emerged.*

*At another assembly, an NStEP trainer and student associate gave a short talk on feedback and outlined the ABCD model of feedback – effective feedback is Accurate, Balanced,*

*Constructive and Depersonalised. Many students may not always feel that feedback is positive, but this formalises a way to give feedback that will be of benefit to students, but also a way that students can present assignments – everything you say should follow the ABCD model.*

*Overall, this demonstrates that students are full of ideas and WANT to enhance their education experience, which will also enhance that of their classmates and also future students.*

[N.H., Physics student]

*Applying for this job at first, I wasn't sure what to expect. I had a developing interest towards the end of my second year of my primary teaching course in teaching and learning and hoped that I could further develop this and contribute toward a discussion about teaching and learning in third-level.*

*What struck me first about the assembly was the sense of collaboration in it. We leaned heavily on the diverse experiences of the assembly members, who came from many different disciplines in different types of institutions, the common thread being an interest in teaching and learning and improving the student experience. This ensured that discussions were always lively, vibrant and often issues were viewed through completely different perspectives. I deeply valued the contributions of my peers on the assembly, which helped me understand the different experiences of other students. The culture in the assembly was one where everyone's opinions were not just respected, but sharing these opinions was encouraged and valued highly.*

*I have also developed a further interest in assessment in third level, and how this can be utilised to improve the student experience, through a student partnership approach. This is something I would not have been exposed to if not for the assembly, and I look forward to furthering this interest over the coming years. As well as this, I have built networks and connections both in my institution and with my peers nationwide which will last long beyond my years on the assembly.*

[E.C., Education student]

### 3. Lessons learned.

The reflections from our student associates demonstrate that they felt their involvement with the assembly was valuable and broadened their learning experience. Feedback from our colleagues in the National Forum was also positive that it supported and enhanced the work of the Forum. When the student assembly was consulted for projects such as Next Steps; the recognition of professional development; the use of open educational resources; and embedding wellbeing in the curriculum, the feedback was thoughtful, rich, grounded in reality, and valuable. Similarly, national projects such as the Teaching Hero Awards would not have had such an impact without the support and hard work of the student associates.

Over the past eighteen months, we have learned some valuable lessons, and we now present them as they may assist higher education institutions or other organisations who are considering setting up such student forums.

(i) Role of student assembly: In framing the aims and role of a student forum, it's important to frame it as an advisory group rather than a student representative group. The role of student representation is fulfilled very well by institutional students' unions and the Union of Students in Ireland, and the student assembly plays more of a role in shaping and "sanity checking" policies and activities before they are brought to student representatives for discussion. The involvement of USI as a key partner in the National Forum student assembly was very effective and useful, and a similar partnership with institutional students' unions is recommended.

(ii) Topics covered: The discussions at the assembly were vibrant and engaging, and sparked discussion on many important topics such as employability, mental health and well-being, student welfare issues, sustainability, decolonising the curriculum, gender equality, rental prices, and student financial support, to mention a few. In some cases, these issues may be outside the scope of the student assembly, but it is helpful to signpost or refer students to forums and services where they can influence these issues, so they retain their sense of agency.

(iii) Online versus face-to-face: The experience of online meetings was overwhelmingly positive for the national student assembly. It allowed the assembly to meet much more frequently than if we had to coordinate meeting venues rotated around the country. This may also apply to multi-campus higher education institutions. The engagement tools facilitated by

online meetings – hold and share, Wooclap, Jamboards, shared google docs, and the chat function – allowed us to ensure that the voices of the quieter students would be heard.

(iv) Diversity of student associates: This diversity was a key part of the student assembly as discussed above. We also debated at length whether first year students should be recruited to the forum. On the one hand they had limited experience of teaching and learning in their institution, and on the other hand they were living through the “*first year experience*” which was valuable. In the Forum we eventually decided not to recruit first years, as we needed our associates to have strong networks in their institution to promote our activities. This requirement for strong networks may not apply within higher education institutions.

(v) Length of service: Following discussions with our student associates, we decided that students could serve two terms in the student assembly. This allowed an influx of new student associates as some associates graduated or decided to step aside, and also retained a group of associates who were familiar with the staff, the way the assembly worked, and the terminology. The mix of returning and new associates also allowed more scope for peer learning and peer support among the assembly members.

(vi) Administrative workload: The recruitment and support of the student associates, as well as the ongoing organisation and operation of the assembly meetings requires a significant time commitment, and this should be considered before establishing such a forum.

## 4. Conclusion.

There is significant literature to support student partnership approaches in higher education. The HEA document on student engagement in decision-making (2016), the establishment of the National Student Engagement Programme, and the launch of the new Steps to Partnership framework for authentic student engagement (NStEP, 2021) are all signs of continued progress and support for this approach in Ireland. Engagement and student partnership is one of the key themes identified in the National Understanding of Student Success (National Forum, 2019) and is also a key enabler in the Student Success Toolkit (National Forum, 2021), and it continues to be a significant focus for higher education institutions. The development of a student assembly, or a similar forum for students, is an approach which can allow for rich and authentic dialogue, consultation, and feedback from students. In the past eighteen months, at least two such forums have been established in Irish higher education institutions.

In January 2022, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) published the Higher Education Authority Bill, which would enshrine student engagement and partnership in the work of the Higher Education Authority (An tÚdarás).

*“An tÚdarás shall, from time to time, at a national level, engage with and seek views from representatives of students (including representatives of students in priority groups) regarding issues of relevance at a national level to the experience of students participating in higher education, including matters related to teaching and learning, research, governance and support services for students.”*

(DFHERIS, 2022, Section 43)

The National Forum student assembly has a role very specifically focused on partnership around teaching and learning and professional development, but it is hoped that the National Forum’s experience in developing such a student assembly will be of assistance to other groups taking this approach.

## 5. Acknowledgements.

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