

Introduction to the Issue.

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Welcome to the first issue of AISHE-J in 2022, our largest to date and one we are most proud to have collaborated with the National Student Engagement Programme (NStEP) on. As a journal, we have been eager for some time to provide an avenue for both student and staff authors to share their work and enhancement with student engagement and partnership. Hence, via our collaboration with NStEP, we decided to devote a Special Issue solely focusing on recent advances in this space. This area has been growing significantly in recent years, with students and staff working on a multitude of activities such as advisory groups, co-creation, decision making and assessment design - together.

As co-editors, we approached this issue by engaging in partnership from the onset, with the team working quite closely in recent months. However, one partnership we are excited to describe to you is that of our newly established panel of student reviewers. This is something that the AISHE-J team had been interested in developing for some time; partnering with NStEP enabled it to happen. Interested students were recruited via NStEP and we conducted a joint, online training workshop during the summer of 2021. These students have since reviewed submissions in parallel with academic experts. Hence, authors were receiving feedback with both the lens of a staff member and a student. As editors, we were highly impressed by both the enthusiasm of the student reviewer panel members, and even more so with the quality of their constructive feedback for the authors. It's a partnership that became the foundation for the success of this Special Issue, and one that all at AISHE-J and NStEP have been fortunate to have been involved with.

1.1 Invited contributions.

The past few years have seen significant developments in student engagement and partnership across Irish higher education, reflecting international trends. We are delighted to present a number of invited submissions from individuals and teams who have contributed significantly to this. The establishment of the NStEP, a joint initiative of Quality and Qualification Ireland (QQI), the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Union of Students of Ireland (USI) has had a transformative impact on Irish Higher Education. In 2021, NStEP launched a new national framework for student engagement and partnership in Irish higher education, revising the Higher Education Authority 2016 'conceptual framework' that strongly positioned students as partners in Irish higher education. In their invited piece, the NStEP team guides us through the collaborative and co-creative process that resulted in the *Steps to Partnership* framework. This new development is the culmination of years of sectoral engagement and collaboration with students and staff, builds a shared understanding to support enhancement, and will support future developments at the national level. *Steps to Partnership* has already been utilised to support a new staff professional development

opportunity and will undoubtedly encourage new ways of approaching student engagement and partnership in the years ahead.

Our second invited article is from the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Over the past decade, Dr. Terry Maguire's landmark leadership at the National Forum has been immense in embedding student partnership. Examples include recruiting student representation on (inter)national review panels from the onset of the Forum, encouraging discipline teams to embed students as equal partners, establishing student success as a priority area with a dedicated team and most recently, the development of a national student intern role and the creation of a national student associate assembly – all focused on energising the sector via student partnership. Hence, we are particularly delighted to include an invited piece from Eoin Crossen *et al.*, co-authored by members of the Forum's most recent student success team and members of their student assembly. Their article specifically describes the establishment of the student assembly, highlighting the rationale for its establishment, in addition to insights into the recruitment process, engagement activities and lessons learned. Ultimately, the role of the student assembly is to *"reinforce the importance of student engagement and partnership as core enablers of student success in Irish higher education"* and it is clear the National Forum, and indeed the wider Irish higher education sector, have reaped significant benefits from the presence of, and contributions from, this group already. You will see from their article that it represents a truly symbiotic and fruitful partnership in Irish HE.

One of the more significant developments in the area of student engagement in the past decade has been the national survey of student engagement – StudentSurvey.ie, formerly the Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE). This provides an incredibly rich source of data about the student experience nationally and locally, within institutions, further enhanced by the 2018 addition of the survey for postgraduate research students, PGR StudentSurvey.ie. In the first of two companion pieces, Siobhán Nic Fhlannchadha and the members of the StudentSurvey.ie Steering group, take stock of 9 years of the survey. They reflect on its development and impact, both nationally and internationally. They note that *'... achieving impact is understood to mean identifying the value which has been added, and continues to be added, to the student experience by this data collection, analysis and the subsequent integration of results into policy and practice'* (p.2) and discuss the opportunities and challenges of this, highlighting the need for *'vision'* within institutions to *'... use the results of StudentSurvey.ie to enable growth and foster development into the institution's best version of itself.'*(p.6).

In the second paper, Siobhán presents an analysis of trends in the StudentSurvey.ie results between 2016 and 2021, representing 235,000 responses. The first part of the paper focuses on trends in the indices of engagement, noting that average scores tended to increase between 2016 and 2020. COVID-19 impacted negatively on all in 2021, with some, such as *Quality of Interactions*, being more affected than others. The second part of the paper compares the Irish responses to key questions with the responses to the same questions from surveys conducted internationally. While international comparisons have their challenges, the paper demonstrates *'... this examination of high-level results for other countries provides international context to the national results for Ireland, which was valuable'* (p.23). Both of these papers are likely to be of very wide interest across and beyond Irish higher education.

The final invited piece, by Maria Moxey and colleagues, discusses the MA and PG Certificate in Student Engagement in Higher Education offered by the University of Winchester. This incredibly innovative programme, the first of its kind in the UK '*... brings together sector experts to look critically at student engagement research, policy and practice*' (p.2) and makes very effective use of a blended approach to delivery. A striking feature of the programme is its cross-institution collaboration: '*The cross institutional collaboration on teaching delivery and sharing of best practice, adopted by the programme, challenges the notion that institutions should see themselves as competitors. Rather, the PgCert and MA in Student Engagement in Higher Education demonstrates a radical model of delivery in which the study of student engagement could indeed test the pressures of a market-driven model of education*'(p.11). The paper concludes with a generous offer of advice to those interested in setting up a similar programme – we are sure that many colleagues will be keen to follow up.

A call for contributions for this Special Issue was released in early 2021 and we were both surprised and delighted by the level of interest shown, the large number of high-quality submissions and the number of student authors involved. The papers we present to you today are varied, including research articles, opinion pieces, reflective pieces, case studies and rapid responses. A wide range of disciplines professional areas approaches are represented, and the papers deal with partnership in a wide variety of domains. There are three broad themes in contributions: Supporting diversity in student engagement, partnership in practice and the impact of the pandemic on partnership and engagement.

1.2 Supporting diversity in student engagement.

In his piece on student representation, Kevin McStravock outlines the critical importance of students' union to embedding and supporting student engagement practices through effective representation. He particularly emphasises the difficulty and challenge for student representative organisations to reflect the needs and experiences of diverse student populations, and the barriers that this can create for their success. While the article highlights a lack of evidential research in Irish higher education in comparison to students' unions in the UK, it hopefully highlights significant emerging practice.

Another issue of diversity within the student engagement space is the challenge of reflecting diverse student needs and aspirations through, sometimes limited, opportunities like representation on committees or student survey results. Emma O'Brien and Aoife Chawke outline a narrative inquiry methodological approach through the use of student personas to facilitate and encourage safe spaces for storytelling, as well as student-teacher dialogue. The full potential of this approach to foster greater understanding in both formal decision-making and informal learning spaces is yet to be explored, but it certainly presents huge promise when considering the experiences of the whole study body.

1.3 Partnership in practice.

In 'Learning together in, and about, student-staff partnership in Higher Education', Katharina Kurz and her staff and student co-authors from Maynooth University discuss the student-staff

partnership that has been developed in the context of a digital teaching and learning enhancement initiative. They offer insightful reflections on both the process of partnership and the outcomes. The challenges are thoughtfully considered and the authors note that *'Furthermore, our understanding of power-dynamics changed: recognizing that power-dynamics (as experienced, for example, in different levels of expertise) always play some role in collaborative work, enabled us to work with them and employ them in productive ways rather than working against them'* (p.17).

In their piece, Jonny Johnston and Ben Ryan of Trinity College Dublin treat us to a wonderful insight into a productive and enriching student-staff partnership, taking the Students-as-Partners (SaP) approach from theory into practice. Through their lived experiences, they highlight barriers, successes and lessons learned on how to build and sustain strong and successful partnership. Their article also contains a student generated appendix that will support students and staff keen to establish or maintain something similar in their institution.

Cassie Lowe and Tom Lowe of the University of Winchester focus on partnership in quality assurance. Their paper deals with student members of quality assurance panels and reports findings from a study of 35 institutions, largely in the UK, but also Ireland and North America. They found that, notwithstanding considerable variation in practice, student engagement in quality assurance panels was seen as very positive for students, staff and for course quality. The paper provides a valuable insight into the role of student reviewers in quality assurance and the authors make some very useful suggestions for further development.

Mark O'Sullivan and Neil O'Conaill of Mary Immaculate College are concerned with the role of partnership in school placement for trainee teachers. They report findings from a study of the experience of co-operating primary teachers. They conclude that *'... while willing, [they] are often reliant on their own experiences and interpretation in how they engage with student teachers and how this in turn affects the experiences of those involved in the process'* (p.15) and offer some useful recommendations to support and enhance engagement.

Coming primarily out of University College Dublin but also involving four other collaborating institutions, Stergiani Kostopoulou and colleagues show us the various levels of partnership developed within their 'Educator Programme'. Partnership has been a cornerstone for many of their associated successes, and here, readers can see the breath of partnerships and tools in place to ensure success, in addition to exemplars of outputs.

Building capacity for student engagement and partnership benefits from the conduct and dissemination of pedagogical research. In their contribution, Ciara Duignan and Denise McGrath from UCD contend that the students should be involved as authentic partners from the outset of any such research. In this context, they discuss how a reframing of institutional ethical procedures may be necessary in order to enable scholarship that truly seeks the student voice.

In *'Partnering with Students Through Peer Video Learning at University College Dublin'* Crystal Fulton, along with students and staff from UCD, reflect on a video creation for peer learning project underpinned by the students as partners, SaP, model. They discuss how the SaP model both imbued students with a sense of ownership of their learning, while also encouraging staff to consider student perspectives.

1.4 The impact of the pandemic on partnerships.

In 'Teaching, Learning and Assessment within a School of Computing: Did Student Partnership have an Impact', a co-authored paper, Monica Ward, Marius Senchea and Clare Gormley of Dublin City University explore the impact of partnership on computing students' learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. They conclude that it worked well but highlight the need for further work on issues such as assessment volume.

In their contribution, Rebecca Boylan, Hazel Killeen and Sinéad M. Hynes describe the *Build-A-Box Campaign*, an innovative service-learning project that aimed to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable communities, through a partnership between occupational therapy students from the National University of Ireland Galway, community partners and service users.

Carol Rizkalla, Katia Yazji and Celine Marmion at the RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences detail how their student-staff partnership created, developed, and launched a successful and impactful remote summer research programme for students and principal investigators during the COVID-19 pandemic - an impressive feat.

In a reflective piece that demonstrates the huge importance of fostering meaningful student-teacher relationships, where ideas and ambitions can flourish through engagement and partnership, Triona Seery guides us through her personal and professional journey as a student undergraduate research on a summer programme at Maynooth University. Weaving the story of personal development as a student, researcher, and historian, Triona leaves the reader in no doubt how authentic empowerment and agency in the learning environment can leave a lasting impact.

'Students' Opinions on Their Experience of University Career Services: Suggestions for Post-COVID-19 Ireland' was co-written by current students and recent graduates of Trinity College Dublin, in collaboration with a Careers Guidance Counsellor. Lena Klein and her co-authors offer some interesting perspectives on the future of university career counselling post-pandemic, recommending a hybrid approach, facilitated by technology with a focus on deeper consultations.

1.5 Last but not least,

This issue would not have been possible without our dedicated authors. Recent times have not been easy for the sector, but your work on student engagement and partnership is developing and enhancing the HE sector on many levels. We also want to pay tribute to the incredible and generous work of our tireless academic expert, and student reviewers who each found time in their busy schedules to help bring this issue to you. We are particularly pleased to have so many students contributing to this issue as both authors and reviewers. We appreciate the time, expertise and commitment you all put in and we are sending gratitude to everyone who made the vision of this Special Issue become a reality.

Finally, we wish to issue a call for anyone interested in joining our editorial team at AISHE-J. If you managed to find any typo in this issue, you are most welcome to get in touch via the [contact page](#) on AISHE-J website to learn more about the role or to apply for consideration with details of any relevant experience and suitability for the role. We look forward to hopefully hearing from interested candidates in the near future as we continue to support the Irish higher education sector.

We hope that you enjoy this fascinating collection of contributions that offers an insight into the scale, breadth and diversity of student engagement and partnership in Ireland today.