



# **OWNING / OUR FUTURE**

**The student manifesto for the  
Northern Ireland Assembly elections**



# Foreword



Students are at the heart of the work of NUS-USI. We make it our priority to be responsive to the hopes, needs and concerns of Northern Ireland's student body and, when we travel to university and college campuses, we do so to maintain an ongoing conversation which grounds what we do in their experiences.

This manifesto is based on that ongoing conversation and those experiences.

The vast majority of students currently within our tertiary education system were born into a time of renewed hope, a time with the promise of peace, stability and prosperity.

It is now time for that promise to be delivered.

NUS-USI, as the voice of students right across higher and further education, believes that, if there is one thing that should demand consensus from our politicians, it is the need to have a fair and accessible education system which is funded properly and sustainably.

This document represents months of consultation with students of all disciplines and levels, of all abilities and backgrounds. It too, perhaps more pertinently has been informed by the context of those who currently do not, or cannot, access tertiary education, as well as broader social debates that shape the lives of students.

This manifesto is just one element of a much wider campaign coordinated by NUS-USI. From registering students to vote, to giving them the skills and knowledge to lobby election candidates, we are working to ensure that our 200,000 students that live, work and study here continue to play a role as active citizens in their campuses, and in our wider society.

As an initial ask, **I call on our political parties to convene an All-Party Group on Students** following the 2016 Assembly election as a forum for MLAs to discuss and better understand the range of issues facing students.

This document outlines our key priorities for education, work and society and reflects our vision for the future. We call on all political parties to work with us to ensure that our aspiration is realised.

*Fergal McFerran*

**Fergal McFerran,**  
NUS-USI President



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**We campaign to promote,  
extend and defend the  
rights of students.**

# Introduction

## Who we are

The National Union of Students-Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI) was established in 1972 under a unique arrangement where both the British and Irish national student unions, National Union of Students (NUS) and Union of Students in Ireland (USI) respectively, jointly organised in Northern Ireland. This promoted student unity across the sectarian divide and for over 40 years NUS-USI has continued to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse membership.

Today NUS-USI represents the interests of around 200,000 students from across all university and college campuses in Northern Ireland. We campaign to promote, extend and defend the rights of students.

We have a proud track record in uniting students across the community to deliver positive change for all. This enables students today to shape policy, ensuring that a future benefiting students is delivered. NUS-USI has had North-South and cross-UK co-operation from its inception, long before the Belfast Agreement created political co-operation of this nature. We lead the way on good relations, equality issues and tertiary education matters and, through the strength of our membership, our collective power will continue to ensure we continue to lead the way.

## The Owing Our Future campaign

*"We are a community of learners with a social conscience, and it's about time we talked openly, honestly and strategically about the vision we have for Northern Ireland, and about the hopes we have for a prosperous, socially just, thriving and safe Northern Ireland...We can be the driving force behind a democratic revolution...The Assembly election in 2016 provides us with an opportunity we cannot waste"*

**Fergal McFerran, NUS-USI President**

NUS-USI wants politics in Northern Ireland to reflect the needs of our students and deliver on our objectives for education, work and community. The Owing Our Future campaign calls, not only on students and young people to take control of their own future through active citizenship, but it also calls on our decision makers and politicians to ensure that they use their power to create a better, fairer society for all.

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# Our vision - education

## Our vision for education

Greater levels of investment in our tertiary education system must be a priority and we call on political parties to ensure that the true public value of education is reflected in the next Programme for Government.

We believe that it is through more comprehensive investment in higher and further education that we can truly transform society by delivering opportunity, enhancing social mobility and setting a precedent for a fairer and more equal Northern Ireland.

We need a holistic funding system that better supports students to enter tertiary education, as well as better support for supporting them throughout their time as a student.

The development of a system that recognises the public value of education offers us an opportunity to firmly establish ourselves as a flourishing skilled economy, attracting business and investment from across the world, and creating jobs and prosperity across our society.

## NUS-USI asks that:

- Government implements a sustainable funding model of higher and further education which is free at the point of access to the learner, free from tuition fees and the burden of future debt.
- Government preserves and enhances student support. Maintenance loans and grants, the special support grant, and health-related course bursaries should be increased in line with inflation, to ensure that they match the significant increase in the cost of living over the past decade. Also, education maintenance allowance must be fully maintained at its current level, at the very least.
- A Shari'ah-compliant loan system be created, as is being done in some other parts of the UK, to enable Muslim students to access student loans.
- More student places are created across further education (FE) and higher education (HE) to address the needs of all future students, and develop the economy by delivering an increased skill base for employers.
- Government maintains investment in the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (CAFRE), to maintain or increase the number of student places available at CAFRE.
- As students consistently cite the cost of transport as one of the greatest challenges that they face, government should seek to deliver one overall student discount travel card for students and apprentices to ensure that all students can avail of all public transport discounts and offers.
- Steps are taken to make transferability in, and between, higher education and further education as easy as possible, so people can change courses easily to help them reach their potential.
- Government should enable flexibility on course duration to help meet the needs of students, and examine the possibility of people being able to study FE courses earlier in their studies.
- Widening access and participation funding must at the very least be maintained at current levels or increased, to ensure that education opportunities are maximised for everyone.
- Government does more to promote STEM courses, apprenticeships and career opportunities to women learners.
- Government increases affordable childcare facilities in FE and HE.
- Government delivers more purpose-built, affordable student accommodation, run by institutions, government or by councils.



# Our vision - work

## Our vision for work

Increasing numbers of students work alongside their studies, many of whom do so to subsidise the cost of their education. We work closely with the trade union movement as we acknowledge the importance of representation within education and the workplace. Our partnership with NIC-ICTU reaffirms our vision to develop a culture of confidence and security.

Students often tell us that they don't have access to adequate careers advice and guidance and as a result end up in a course that is unsuitable. We also know that there is an ongoing challenge with retaining the highly skilled graduates we have developed.

With these things in mind, we want to see government take a long-term, strategic view of graduate employment. Proper investment in our education system should be complimented by an economic plan which reflects and values the diversity of skills that our learners hold.



## NUS-USI asks that:

- Government's focus must be on creating employment, not just on enhancing employability. Government must deliver policy to create enough high quality jobs across all subject areas and sectors. It is essential that people who complete courses in any subject have employment opportunities open to them which relate to their course. Employability skills are of little use if there are no jobs available.
- A living wage is delivered for all, rather than simply a minimum wage.
- Apprentice pay must be the same as the living wage.
- Greater financial support is offered to those students undertaking healthcare related courses who play a significant role in our health service.
- Barriers to retraining be removed. It is right that the student body continues to diversify and that education remains available to all ages.
- Government provides the option of paid work placements for any FE or HE course that lasts two years or more.
- A green new deal should be created to help create jobs in the sustainability sector.
- Social clauses must be part of any public sector funded work, where possible, to deliver more work opportunities for apprentices, graduates and FE college leavers.
- Government acts to restrict the use of zero hour contracts in the workplace.



**Delivering equality and a genuinely shared future**



# Our vision - society

## Our vision for society

NUS-USI was founded on the basis of building a shared future, working for equality and working together across the community to deliver for all students. The organisation delivered ground-breaking North-South and cross UK co-operation in 1972, long before this model was enshrined in the 1998 Belfast Agreement.

As we formed this manifesto we did so reflecting on the hundreds of conversations we had with students across Northern Ireland. We know that our membership looks to the future with an ambitious optimism that is embedded in the need for stable, effective government that works for all within our society.

Delivering equality and a genuinely shared future are both essential to cementing peace and allowing Northern Ireland to reach its potential. We aspire to a society of equals where all forms of societal division are removed. We believe that government should act to eliminate discrimination and enshrine equality within legislation.

Northern Ireland has experienced difficult times in recent years and government must act with positive leadership and responsibility to protect the peace that was so hard won, and work to remove societal divisions to create a shared future for all.

We want to place focus on the need to recognise the significant role that young people, students and wider society can play in delivering better government. Our partnership with the NI Youth Forum is testament to our belief that, whilst a student is a learner, they too are a citizen with a contribution to make. Government which is open, transparent, and accountable and encourages participation can only be good for everyone.

While political leadership is essential, the burden should not fall on politicians alone. That is why we support the creation of a social partnership group, bringing together representatives from all sectors of society to build agreement on unresolved shared future matters or on economic challenges, through their combined expertise.

NUS-USI would like to see every young person have the chance to receive integrated schooling. A study carried out by Deloitte into the cost of division published in 2007 found that division could be costing £1.5 billion every year.

Given that the findings were published in 2007, this figure will have increased significantly. We believe that money spent on maintaining segregation should be invested in the future, and in the education of our students.

## NUS-USI asks that:

- Agreement is made on unresolved shared future issues and a timetabled action plan created to tackle societal division, to build good relations and unlock money spent on maintaining division.
- Government commits to ensure all children are educated together in integrated schooling, ensuring that the demand for integrated education is met.
- Legislation to deliver marriage equality is created.
- The blood donation ban on gay and bisexual men is scrapped.
- Legislation is created to enable women to have choice on reproductive matters.
- Government reviews the current provision of sex and relationship education in schools with the aim of enhancing the focus placed upon consent in healthy relationships.
- Commitment is given to tackle racism and all forms of inequality through the creation of robust action plans.
- Diversity in politics is prioritised, to ensure that the NI Assembly and elected representation reflects all of society.
- Government creates a social partnership group which includes representatives from the community and voluntary sector, business, the student movement, education institutions, trade unions and government.
- Government acts upon previous commitments to deliver legislation enabling the creation of an official opposition in the NI Assembly.
- The petition of concern mechanism is replaced with an alternative measure that protects minority rights which cannot be used to veto other matters.
- Voting rights are extended to 16 and 17 year olds.



**For decades, students' unions have quietly contributed to and actively enhanced wider society.**

# Our vision - future

## A vision for our future

For decades students' unions have quietly played a significant role in the development of universities and colleges but, more than that, they have also contributed to and actively enhanced wider society.

Our students' unions have a long and proud history of empowering and upskilling our future political leaders, civil servants and entrepreneurs. They open up a world of opportunity for people to try new sports or hobbies. These opportunities play an important role in the student experience, and in augmenting the skills of students, as their course of study itself.

Students' unions also play a very positive role in society, whether through volunteering and charity work, or in the opportunities which they provide for people to gain skills or get involved in clubs and societies.

Unions and student support services provide vital services for students around mental health matters, careers guidance, and financial advice, making a real, tangible and positive impact on students' lives every day. These services are crucial to the wellbeing of students.



The Education Act (1994) contains significant provisions outlining the role and governance of students' unions. This applies to England, Scotland and Wales, but not Northern Ireland. Students' unions are protected elsewhere in legislation but not here.

Our ongoing work with the Department for Employment and Learning in enshrining a culture of partnership between educational institutions and their students' unions is helping to rediscover our universities and colleges as participative, engaging hubs of creative learning. This model of partnership will only deliver dividends in relation to teaching quality and learning standards if the autonomy of our students' unions is protected and their funding is sustainable.

Budget cuts and their potentially devastating impact on students' unions also further highlight the need to enshrine and protect this through legislation.

## NUS-USI asks that:

- Legislation is introduced to protect the role, autonomy, funding and democracy of further and higher education students' unions. Legislation, similar to the 1994 Education Act which applies in other parts of the UK, will help improve the quality of education, improve the student experience, protect the student representative structure and student involvement in the quality process.
- Government invests in students' unions and student support services in further and higher education so that all students, including international students, receive the best possible support and advice on careers, mental health and finance matters.
- Government delivers increased and more formalised partnership between educational institutions, students and government, to ensure that the needs of students are met through increased engagement.
- Government maintains and endeavours to increase funding in mental health services for young people and students.





# OWNING / OUR FUTURE

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