

Long-Term Postgraduate Representation



TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN
STUDENTS' UNION

Published March 13th 2023

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1. Introduction

Since 1968, TCD Students' Union (TCDSU) has represented all students in Trinity College Dublin (TCD). It is recognised by the Board of Trinity College and the Council of the University of Dublin, and exists to defend the academic, social and welfare needs of our members.

Being a part of an organisation built on solidarity is not to be taken for granted. The people who have built this union over the last five decades believed in the power of the collective to make change on campus, as well in local and national politics.

TCDSU evolved alongside the Graduate Students' Union (GSU), which had been the primary representative body for TCD postgraduates until September 22 2022, when the University Board formally de-recognised the GSU due to a number of unresolved issues in its administration.

It is worth emphasising that when you derecognise an institution, its members do not disappear into thin air. 5629 individuals were enrolled in postgraduate programmes in TCD during the academic year 2021/2022¹. Each one of you still faces issues in the College. Each one of you still needs union support.

Since September 22 2022, TCDSU stepped in to ensure that the postgraduate voice had a seat at decision-making tables in college this year — but the future of long-term postgraduate representation is in your hands.

This report provides background context to the consultation on long-term postgraduate representation. Secondly, it outlines the steps taken to secure interim representation. Thirdly, it details the consultation outcomes of our town halls, think-ins, and written submission forms.

Based on the above, in Section 5, the TCDSU President has prepared a recommendation for a Selection and Implementation Process on long-term postgraduate representation options. This will be opened to a final consultation period, with the aim of running a plebiscite before the end of this academic year.

If you have any questions about the content of this report, please contact the TCDSU President Gabrielle Fullam at president@tcdsu.org

2. Background Context

The TCDSU Constitution states that “the Union shall represent all students” and is recognised as such by the Board of Trinity College and the Council of the University of Dublin. This means that postgraduate students have always been considered Members of the Union.

Since the GSU was established in 1973 to be the primary representative body for all postgraduate students in Trinity College Dublin, your representation within TCDSU has, historically, been fulfilled by a long-standing Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) with the GSU. In the past this ensured that both organisations worked together to defend our members' interests in College.

On September 22 2022, the TCD Dean of Graduate Studies emailed all postgraduates to

¹ “Key Facts and Figures.” *Higher Education Authority*, <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/>. Accessed 9 March 2023.

communicate the decision of the University Board to suspend funding from the Graduate Students' Union (GSU) which is no longer a recognised body in Trinity College Dublin.

This decision was made by the Capitations Committee, as the GSU had not complied with the mandated report of their finances, and had not addressed recurring concerns with the constitutionality and transparency of Emergency General Meetings (EGMs) and elections. In light of this, on September 22 2022, the University Board approved a mandate for Trinity College Dublin Students' Union (TCDSU) to nominate postgraduate students to attend relevant College Committees at the invitation of the committee chair. Schools were instructed to appoint interim reps to ensure the graduate voice was heard in College decision-making bodies until TCDSU set up a postgraduate election system.

TCDSU believes that postgraduates deserve representation — at class/discipline, school, faculty, and College Committee level. We also believe in the values of democracy, transparency, and fairness.

Over the last number of months, we have encouraged you to make your voice heard at Postgraduate Town Halls, drop-in sessions, as well as via written submission forms. Your feedback is the basis of our Interim Representation strategy ([see section 3](#)) and the Long-Term Representation strategy proposed at the end of this report (see [section 4](#) and [5](#)).

The Union starts and ends with you! It is in our power to build a new system that lasts; that empowers every member to defend themselves and their peers during their time in Trinity.

3. Interim Representation

3.1. Class & Discipline Elections

TCDSU held a Postgraduate Town Hall on the 4 and 5 October 2022, after which the TCDSU Education Officer compiled a list of every postgraduate constituency and allocated a proportional amount of reps to each cohort, based on size. For PhD candidates, a list of each discipline of study was compiled and allocated a rep position.

On 15 November 2022, the TCDSU Communications & Marketing Officer circulated an email inviting all postgraduates to nominate themselves for the Class & Discipline Elections, and to register to vote with TCDSU by 29 November at 6pm. A reminder email was circulated on 25 November and 29 November. Online voting opened on 1 December, with an extension of polling hours until 5pm on Saturday 3 December. All current TCD postgraduates were eligible to vote if they registered by 29 November at 6pm.

Successful candidates were notified of their election by the Education Officer via email on Sunday December 4th 2022.

There are a number of vacant rep positions in courses/disciplines where no candidate nominated themselves for election by the deadline of Tuesday Nov 29th 6pm. If you are in one of those constituencies and would like to represent your class in TCDSU, please email education@tcdsu.org and chair@tcdsu.org

As per [Article 7.4.3.\(d\) of the TCDSU Constitution](#), if the nominations close with no nominees for any constituency, the first valid nomination thereafter shall be declared elected.

3.2. College Committee Elections

Since Class Reps are Officers of the Union, and therefore are already accountable to SU Council, the decision was made that only PG Class and Discipline reps would be eligible to run in College Committee elections. This avoided the need to create temporary positions via vote at SU Council, of which undergraduate reps are the majority. It also allowed the elections to be held at a more urgent timeline than would have otherwise been possible.

On 20 January 2022, the TCDSU Education Officer circulated an email to all elected TCDSU Class/Discipline Representatives inviting them to stand in the elections for the College Committee positions listed here. They were advised that nominations closed on 23 January.

On 20 January 2022, the TCDSU Communications & Marketing Officer also circulated an email to all Trinity postgraduates regarding the opening of nominations and key election dates. All postgraduates were eligible to vote.

Online voting ran from 25 January until Friday 27 January. Candidate manifestos were made available on the tcdsu.org website and linked in the voting email sent on 25 January. A reminder email was also circulated on 27 January. Successful candidates were notified of their election by the Education Officer via email on Monday 30 January.

The following individuals were elected and will serve as your representatives for the remainder of the 22/23 Academic Year. You can contact them via their @tcd.ie emails.

- **University Board** Matt Murtagh-White (mmurtagh@tcd.ie)
- **University Council** Conor Reddy (reddyco@tcd.ie) and Oran Cassidy
- **Graduate Studies Committee** Viktor Jelen (jelenv@tcd.ie) and Almudena Moreno Borrallo (amorenob@tcd.ie)
- **Coiste na Gaeilge** Ciara Ní Mhurchú (cmurph60@tcd.ie)
- **Equality Committee** Louisa Roos (roosl@tcd.ie)
- **Estates Policy Committee** Matt Murtagh-White (mmurtagh@tcd.ie)
- **Library & Information Policy Committee** Samantha Sink (sinks@tcd.ie)
- **Quality Committee** Shashwat Khandelwal (khandels@tcd.ie)
- **Student Life** Matt Murtagh-White (mmurtagh@tcd.ie) and Claudia Peroni (peronic@tcd.ie)

4. Summary: Consultation on Long-Term Representation

On 22 September 2022, the Academic Registry provided the TCDSU Communications & Marketing Officer with mailing list access for all postgraduates. Since then, that has been our primary mode of communication with the community which has allowed us to invite you all to offer your views on how you want to be represented going forwards.

4.1. PG Town Hall - 4 and 5 October

You can find the full minutes from the Postgraduate Town Halls held on the 4 and 5 October 2022 [at this link](#).

Shortly after the GSU was disbanded, TCDSU held both an online and in person town hall

meeting to discuss the current situation with postgraduate students. The primary focus of these town halls was designing interim representation and explaining the previous situation with the former GSU.

From these discussions, two actions were taken by TCDSU:

1. Lobbying College to open up an investigation into the activity of the GSU and any remaining GSU funds.
2. Election of interim postgraduate representatives, including Class/Discipline Reps at TCDSU Council and College Committees Reps.

4.2. PG Town Hall - 24 January 2023

You can find the full minutes from the Postgraduate Town Hall held on 24 January 2023 [at this link](#).

The focus of this town hall meeting was on options for future long-term representation. This system is intended to stand for many years, it is vital that it is made democratically, with the opportunity for a collective reimagining of postgraduate representation. The actions from this were for TCDSU to hold further consultation, and publish a report including plebiscite wording. The publication of this report was delayed due to low initial engagement with the consultation. We are delighted to finally be able to share it with you.

4.3. Drop-Ins and Think-Ins

On 1 and 3 February 2023, TCDSU Sabbatical Officers made themselves available for postgraduates to discuss ongoing issues on a one on one basis. These saw low attendance

with the exception of Postgraduate Workers' Union (PWO) representatives who engaged in discussion with the TCDSU President on the issue of researcher rights and representation.

On 2 March, we also held a Think-In & Social which saw about 15 postgraduates attend to discuss long-term representation in more depth. At the Think-In, a suggestion was made to establish a separate representative body from TCDSU for researchers, noting the distinct needs of taught and research postgraduates. This was followed by a discussion on the limited capacity of TCDSU to oversee the creation of a separate body, i.e. by definition TCDSU cannot write its constitution or decide how its administration works.

4.4. Written submissions

Since 22 September 2022, TCDSU has encouraged postgraduates to reach out to the TCDSU President with their ideas for long-term representation. This was supplemented with written submissions forms advertised via email.

On 1 February 2023, we opened an initial form which saw low uptake. On 24 February, we circulated a second form which received 44 responses, on which the following is based:

77.7% of our responses were from research postgraduates, while 27.3% were from taught postgraduates.

Of the Postgraduate Researchers who responded; 25% of written submissions detailed support for a distinct body for PG researchers. 72% indicated support for a 'mixed' approach, mainly citing support for distinct Postgraduate Research Roles to be integrated into existing

TCDSU systems, while 3% indicated support for a completely unified approach. Further details into how a 'mixed' approach may function is detailed in [section 5.2](#).

Of the Postgraduate Taught Students, 75% of respondents indicated support for a unified approach to taught masters programs being integrated into TCDSU. 17% of respondents voted for separate bodies, while 8% voted for a mixed approach.

4.5. Summary: Proposed Pathways

It is clear from the consultation responses that there is relative agreement on the preferred pathway being a "mixed" approach where taught masters are integrated into TCDSU while a separate body is formed for research representation.

However, it is also important to note that this view is not unanimous. Many researchers are not members of the Postgraduate Workers' Union (PWO) — which has united around advocacy for a separate body for researchers — and express a closer alignment with the Students' Union.

A separate representative for both taught and research postgraduates has seen little support so far, but notably would have been difficult to select support for, given that the written feedback forms automatically distinguished between PGT and PGR, meaning it would have been logistically difficult to express support for a body which incorporated PGT and PGR that was distinct from TCDSU. This survey was conducted in this fashion due to feedback from the Town Halls and Drop-In sessions which

suggested that PGT and PGR should not be surveyed as a single group.

The TCDSU President thus proposes [four pathways for long-term postgraduate representation](#) for a community-wide plebiscite to be held before the end of the 22/23 Academic Year:

1. **Pathway 1:** The re-establishment of a distinct body which represents taught (PGT) and research (PGR) postgraduate students.
2. **Pathway 2:** The integration of PGT and PGR into TCDSU.
3. **Pathway 3:** The integration of PGT into TCDSU with PGR forming its own body.
4. **Pathway 4:** The integration of PGR into TCDSU with PGT forming its own body.

This allows for all possible combinations of representation, including those which have seen little to no support thus far as TCDSU believes it important not to preliminarily exclude any one.

5. Recommendation: Selection and Implementation Process

5.1. Selection: Plebiscite

These four pathways will be presented to postgraduate taught (PGT) students and research (PGR) workers via a two-part plebiscite. It is proposed that this is facilitated via online vote by TCD Students' Union before the end of the academic year.

Part 1 will be voted on by the entire postgraduate community. Part 2 will be split into a separate PGT and a PGR vote. Both Parts will be voted on in the same plebiscite.

Part 1

“Would you like to see the re-establishment of a distinct and separate body from TCD Students' Union which will be the sole representative organisation for all taught and research postgraduates in Trinity College Dublin?”

- Yes
- No

If you vote Yes, this means that you support **Pathway 1** which would see the re-establishment of a body similar to the Graduate Students' Union (GSU) ([see section 5.3](#)).

If you vote No, this means that you support one of the remaining three pathways. It will then be necessary to establish what level of integration taught and research postgraduates want with TCDSU. This will be determined via Part 2 of the plebiscite.

PGTs will be eligible to vote in Part 2A. PGRs will be eligible to vote in Part 2B.

Part 2A - Taught Postgraduates (PGT)

“Would you prefer Option 1 or Option 2?”

1. Taught postgraduates are fully integrated into the TCDSU system.
or

2. Taught postgraduates establish a separate body that will be the sole representative organisation for all taught postgraduates in Trinity College Dublin.

If you vote Option 1, TCD Students' Union will then consult further on how the TCDSU Constitution would need to be amended to allow for the integration of taught postgraduate representation into existing structures ([see section 5.2](#)).

If you vote Option 2, a separate representative body for taught postgraduates will be supported, and once established, it will be invited to enter into a Memorandum Of Agreement (MoA) with TCDSU for administrative support.

Part 2B - Research Postgraduates (PGR)

“Would you prefer Option 1 or Option 2?”

1. Research postgraduates are fully integrated into the TCDSU system.
or
2. Research postgraduates establish a separate body that will be the sole representative organisation for all research postgraduates in Trinity College Dublin.

If you vote Option 1, TCD Students' Union will consult further on how the TCDSU Constitution would need to be amended to allow for the integration of research postgraduate representation into existing structures ([see section 5.2](#)).

If you vote Option 2, a separate representative body for research postgraduates will be supported, and once established, it will be invited to enter into a Memorandum Of Agreement (MoA) with TCDSU for administrative support.

Selecting a Pathway

1. If the majority vote “Yes” in Part 1, Pathway 1 will be selected.
2. If the majority vote “No” in Part 1, and majority vote “Option 1” in Part 2A *and* Part 2B, Pathway 2 will be selected.
3. If the majority vote “No” in Part 1, and majority PGT vote “Option 1” in Part 2A *but* majority PGR vote “Option 2” in Part 2B, Pathway 3 will be selected.
4. If the majority vote “No” in Part 1, and majority PGR vote “Option 1” in Part 2B *but* majority PGT vote “Option 2” in Part 2A, Pathway 4 will be selected.

5.2. Implementation: TCDSU Constitutional Referendum

If the majority of postgraduates vote “No” in Part 1 — then subsequently select “Option 1” in Part 2A and/or Part 2B — TCD Students' Union will have to determine what integration will look like on the ground. We are now in a position to re-imagine how this can be done, which is a privileged and exciting point to be at.

First, it is worth noting that the Graduate Students' Union (GSU) had approximately €90,000 allocated to its day-to-day operations,

which was primarily used to pay two full-time Sabbatical Officers: The President and Vice-President. This funding can be re-allocated to fund the creation of additional TCDSU Officers who will ensure that the increased representative workload can be accommodated in future years.

This may include the creation of specific full-time or part-time postgraduate support officers, research work officers, and/or the creation of an officer which would reconfigure the division of labour between existing TCDSU Sabbatical Officers. For example, the Welfare & Equality Officer could be split into a dedicated Welfare Officer and a dedicated Equality Officer.

Here, it is important to flag that the College Statutes allocate a space to a postgraduate representative in College Committees, and the primary responsibility of any new postgraduate officer(s) would be to voice the needs of the community in these decision-making spaces.

Second, at a more local level, postgraduates will be integrated into existing TCDSU Class/Discipline Rep, School Convenor, and Faculty Convenor structures. This will ensure that your voices are heard at all levels.

Third, it must be emphasised that the changes outlined above are subject to approval of TCDSU members via referendum as they will require an amendment to the TCDSU Constitution.

It is unlikely that the current Sabbatical Officer Board will be able to facilitate this before the end of its term, which means that a Constitutional Referendum would have to be delivered by the Sabbatical Officer Board that will be taking up office on July 1st 2023.

5.3. Implementation: Creation of Separate Bodies

If a cohort votes for the creation of distinct and separate bodies to TCDSU, TCDSU cannot and should not be the ones to create these organisations by their very definition. TCDSU can also not guarantee that such an organisation, if formed, would be recognised by the Capitations Committee or College Board, or in what timeline this would occur. TCDSU can assist with administrative support, but it must be noted that we, as TCDSU cannot write or create a constitution for a body which is in itself entirely distinct from TCDSU.

TCDSU will continue to represent and support all students of Trinity, as has been our constitutional obligation and primary mandate since our initial creation. Until a specific body is functioning and recognised, TCDSU's interim representation of postgraduates, at Council and all levels of the union will persist until the establishment of a distinct body. TCDSU will also deliver its Council mandates to support external groups, e.g. PWO, for as long as the mandate lasts.

It is likely that a specific working group within TCDSU will be required to help facilitate the formation of a distinct body in a manner that engages with the broader PG community and is democratically mandated and administratively supported. This would have to be proposed and debated at TCDSU Council.

We would also emphasise that while nobody is turned away from our services, a continuation of the interim representation model, without the provision of additional Sabbatical Officers, will increase the strain on our welfare and educational support for all students.

6. Final Consultation Period

The publication of this report marks the beginning of a final consultation period on long-term postgraduate representation. If you have any questions, comments, or suggestions on any part of it, please reach out to Gabi Fullam at president@tcdsu.org

TCDSU will hold a Think-In on this report on Tuesday 14 March from 11-1pm in Atrium Room 2. All postgraduates were invited to attend via email.

This report will also be brought as a discussion item to SU Council 6, which will be held on Tuesday 21 March from 6.30-9pm in the Ed Burke (Arts Building). It will also be live-streamed via the @tcdsu Facebook. All TCDSU members are welcome to attend and raise any amendments they would like to see.

If you would prefer to make your voice heard in a less public setting, you are welcome to email the President at president@tcdsu.org to arrange a meeting. We also encourage you to reach out to your Class/Discipline and College Committee Reps, who have been elected to link you with the union administration.

Based on this feedback, TCDSU will publish a final draft of this report by the end of March, with the aim of holding the plebiscite in April/May.

7. Closing Thoughts from the TCDSU President

From my work as President, I believe wholly and entirely in the concept of the student union as a united front.

While the needs of undergraduates and postgraduates may be different, I do not believe at all that they are contradictory. Additional work has been done by the union in recent years to accommodate and work for the many undergraduate students who have significant placement demands in their course load. In short, I do believe many students are workers and believe TCDSU can and should work to represent them. However, there are strong arguments in favour of the establishment of a distinct union for research workers, both on a practical and ideological level. There are many complications that arise from this, primarily: who is responsible for making and building an entirely new organisation, how can it meet the needs of its members without duplicating resources, what timeline do we expect it to be delivered within. These questions are not

insurmountable, but they are important, and the practicalities should not be underestimated. These are questions that TCDSU itself cannot answer, given that these questions need to be put to those who wish to establish an external organisation.

I also believe it is possible for PGs to simultaneously be supported by a workers union, as well as a students' union as a broader act of solidarity.

This entire year, we have been committed to the idea that this decision must lie with the PG community themselves. This plebiscite has been proposed so as to allow for multiple options to be made available to the community, and as such will require a significant informational push from all involved parties to ensure that an informed decision is made.

Yours In Power,

Gabrielle Fullam,
TCDSU President 22/23



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