



***ISSU Submission to An
Comisiún Toghcháin***
**Draft Research Programme
2024-2026**

Introduction

The Irish Second-Level Students' Union, hereafter referred to as the ISSU, is the national representative body for second-level students in the Republic of Ireland. The membership of the ISSU is based on the student council model and our aim is to provide support, training and assistance to our member student councils. Through this support, the ISSU aims to foster a stronger student voice at all levels of the education system. It is our firm belief that second-level students should be involved in all matters that directly affect them and be respected as equal stakeholders in their education.

Our work is in line with The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015/2020 and we work together towards the educational goals and outcomes set out in Better Outcomes Brighter Futures. The ISSU greatly values the working relationship between our organisation and governing bodies in striving to achieve these goals and to realise Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Our goal is to assist in developing a school system that fully empowers students as partners in their education and thus achieve their full potential and improve society as responsible citizens.

Executive Summary

The ISSU broadly welcomes the Draft Research Programme 2024-2026. With the overt rise in mis and disinformation in society¹ especially as those who do not feel heard turn to disinformation², the ISSU notes trusted sources of information, such as An Comisiún Toghcháin are invaluable to inform political processes and to our members, students, as they develop into responsible citizens.

The establishment to An Comisiún Toghcháin, hereafter referred to as An Comisiún, was strongly welcomed by the ISSU, as an organisation founded on the principles of participation, democracy and citizenship. It is with this in mind that the ISSU wished to put forward a submission to this Draft Research Programme under the following 6 headings, The five proposed research strands, Strand A : Longitudinal survey research and Data collection, Strand B : Electoral law, Electoral systems and Electoral infrastructure, Strand C : Integrity of electoral events, Strand D : Education, Public engagement and Inclusion, Strand E : Blue sky/Curiosity-driven research.

¹ Uisce Faoi Thalamh: An Investigation Into the Online Mis- and Disinformation Ecosystem in Ireland

² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/06/1121572>

This is then followed with recommendations pursuant to the discussions under each heading.

Both research around young people and Vote at 16 are priority areas for the ISSU in this submission;

The ISSU notes with concern that data on the civic participation of young people in Ireland is quite scarce³ and highlights this especially as Ireland has a very young population⁴. In 2008, Ireland had the second highest proportion of 10–14-year-olds in the European Union⁵. The high birth rate in Ireland⁶ and rate of natural increase⁷ indicates that the population of young people is likely to remain high for the foreseeable future.

The ISSU believes and maintains that young people from the age of 16 should have the right to vote as one of its highest priorities, as was upheld at the ISSU's Chomhdháil Bhliantúil⁸. Widely supported by students, organisations and governments both nationally⁹, and in Europe¹⁰ there are many positives to vote at 16 and pre-existing research. "By lowering the voting age, students will be able to have more of a say in democracy and in turn their education system. It is vital for uplifting and defending the student voice"¹¹, a step vital in achieving the ISSU's goal.

The ISSU believes that all high quality research used to inform decision making is invaluable; however the ISSU notes the importance of high quality research delivered in a timely manner.

³ Redmond, P., E. Staffa, K. Ciprikis, S. McGuinness and O. Gilmore (2023). Sub-minimum wages in Ireland, ESRI Research Series 167, Dublin: ESRI, <https://doi.org/10.26504/rs167>

⁴ Eurostat, 2015; Government of Ireland, 2019; DCYA, 2020

⁵ CSO, 2009

⁶ CSO, 2017; Eurostat, 2017; Government of Ireland, 2019

⁷ CSO, 2022c; CSO, 2022d

⁸ ISSU, 2023

⁹ <https://www.youth.ie/get-involved/campaigns/vote-at-16/>

¹⁰ <https://www.youthforum.org/topics/vote-at-16>

¹¹ ISSU, 2023

1. The five proposed research strands

1.1) *The 5 proposed research strands pose no apparent partisan issues and cover the elements of An Comisiún's responsibility.*

- **The ISSU notes:** *With regard to the research strands, there is mentioned in An Comisiún's materials that it will play a central role in "democratic and electoral systems"'. However, the ISSU notes there is an absence of explicit mention of research into democratic systems. As An Comisiún intends to play a central role in democratic systems the ISSU believes a strand/s should more forthrightly address democratic systems.*
- **The ISSU further notes:** *Regarding 'democratic systems' there are various forms democratic participation that take place in Irish society today, including but not limited to elections, citizens assemblies and actions online. The ISSU recognises An Comisiún's namesake as the the electoral commission however, the ISSU notes the need to recognise the diverse democratic landscape in Ireland.*
- **The ISSU notes with concern:** *The absence of a research strand/s addressing informal or non-traditional democratic participation disproportionately affects students and young people under 30 as these groups are shown to consume and practice political and social action online (and differently) more than others¹².*

2. Strand A : Longitudinal survey research and Data collection

2.1) *A more robust National Election Study conducted by An Comisiún is welcomed by the ISSU. The ISSU notes that democracy and voting is a habit¹³ and sees this as a potential area of investigation.*

- **The ISSU notes:** *The different levels of government present in Ireland (local, European, national,) and the different degrees of engagement¹⁴ do not always provide a complete picture. As such the ISSU would like to suggest a holistic approach to longitudinal research on political participation at the different levels of government and if they are correlated. (e.g. does participation in localities lead to participation on European or national level? Or vice versa, Does one form of participation/engagement lead to further participation/engagement).*

¹² Bowman et al., 2023

¹³ John Dewey - *Freedom and Culture*, 1939

¹⁴ Houses of the Oireachtas, 2020, Houses of the Oireachtas, 2019, European Parliament in collaboration with Kantar, 2019

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- **The ISSU further notes:** Research of this type could lead to more coordinated approaches to voter registration campaigns by civil society or government, more meaningful engagement of the public with institutions and elected representatives.

3. Strand B : Electoral law, Electoral systems and Electoral infrastructure

3.1) The ISSU strongly supports the suggestion of research on expanding eligibility for postal voting.

- **The ISSU notes:** With regard to electoral infrastructure, accessibility remains a relevant issue for students. The ISSU recognises significant steps forward in accessibility for voter registration but remains concerned about access to polling stations for rural voters and those in geographically secluded locations.
- **The ISSU further notes:** The inconvenience of paperwork and registrations complicates the voting process for first time voters and those with medical conditions. The ISSU believes simplifying this process has the potential to increase voter turnout and ensure more positive experiences in voting, supporting the habit of voting.

4. Strand C : Integrity of electoral events

4.1) The ISSU strongly supports research into online electoral interference and research to ensure transparency in relation to political advertising.

- **The ISSU notes:** The regulation around election posters is strict however, political advertising online has little to no enforcement to date. Furthermore external influences including but not limited to targeted advertising, social media, extremism and psychological operations online which are major concerns for students and young people.
- **The ISSU notes with concern:** The appearance of anxiety around elections as young people and students face multiple influences such as parents, teachers, exam timing and social media resulting in this anxiety.

5. Strand D : Education, Public engagement and Inclusion

5.1) The ISSU believes and maintains that young people from the age of 16 should have the right to vote as one of its highest priorities, as was upheld at the ISSU's Chomhdháil Bhliantúil¹⁵. On a European level there is a wealth of information,

¹⁵ISSU, 2023

research and debate relevant to vote at 16¹⁶. The ISSU supports the examination of other states' experiences regarding vote at 16, in particular Scotland and Austria. The ISSU further supports any and all moves to put votes at 16 in place.

- **The ISSU notes with concern:** That the delivery of high quality research is paramount to a properly informed legislature and further notes the same if not more crucial need for timely research. The campaign for Vote at 16 in Ireland has been present since 2009¹⁷ leading to a concern that high quality research has not been provided to the legislature in a timely manner to adequately address this issue since that time despite Ireland's Convention on the Constitution 2012-2014 that recommended Ireland lower its voting age to 16.
- **The ISSU notes:** Education is not a requirement to vote however, the ISSU notes that education has an impact on civic and social education¹⁸. In particular, the ISSU has long supported and advocated for subjects such as Politics and Society and CSPE.

5.2) The ISSU believes students who speak Irish should have the right to interpret election materials in Irish.

- **The ISSU notes:** As Ireland's first official language is Irish, the ISSU believes an awareness of Irish should be required for candidates or elected officials to properly engage with students whose first or preferred language is Irish, especially in Gaeltacht areas. However the ISSU recognises that the Irish language should not be a disqualifying or qualifying factor in a candidate running for election.

5.3) Information on democratic and electoral processes is important to support increased voter turnout and confidence in voters not familiar with democratic and electoral processes.

- **The ISSU notes:** Freely available resources with unbiased information in plain and simple language are invaluable to supporting the confidence of inexperienced or first time voters.
- **The ISSU further notes:** International Protection Applicants, those in Ireland on a visa or stamp or those from other European states may not be familiar with election regulation in Ireland and have no simple, reliable sources to turn to for information.

5.4) The ISSU supports the research of electoral participation of under-reached groups including increasing representation of women, people with disabilities and

¹⁶European Youth Forum, Resolution on lowering the electoral age to the age of 16, 2006, Wagner, Markus et al., 2012, Resolution 387 of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, 2015, European Parliament proposal for a Council regulation P9_TA (2022)0129, 2022, Jan Eichhorn and Christine Hübner, Votes-at-16 in Scotland, 2014 – 2021

¹⁷ NYCI 'The Truth about Youth', 2009

¹⁸ What is education's impact on civic and social engagement? OECD, 2006

from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The ISSU further supports research to measure the diversity of candidates for elections and consider ways to increase this.

- **The ISSU notes:** There is a concerning lack of representatives and candidates under the age of 30, to properly represent students and young people at the local, European and national level.
- **The ISSU further notes:** The importance of diverse candidates and the diversity of opinions in the political process is important to ensure good and checked decision making and a healthy democracy.

5.5) Engaging people in civic participation is import and is habitual¹⁹. It can also be practised in many different forms²⁰.

- **The ISSU notes:** It regularly promotes rights based, problem solving, experiential based and non formal education methods. Often encouraging passive regular democratic engagement.

6. Strand E : Blue sky/Curiosity-driven research

6.1) The ISSU strongly supports Blue Sky and Curiosity-driven research as it can often provide valuable insights into otherwise unknown or under-resourced research areas.

- **The ISSU notes with concern:** Research and data on the civic participation of young people in Ireland is quite scarce²¹ and highlights this especially as Ireland has a very young population²². In 2008, Ireland had the second highest proportion of 10–14-year-olds in the European Union²³. The high birth rate in Ireland²⁴ and rate of natural increase²⁵ indicates that the population of young people is likely to remain high for the foreseeable future.
- **The ISSU further notes:** Young people often participate in democracy in non formal, non traditional or non institutional ways²⁶ this leads to young peoples participation or 'interest' in politics or political issues not being properly recorded.

¹⁹Coppock, A. and Green, D.P. (2016), *Is Voting Habit Forming? New Evidence from Experiments and Regression Discontinuities*.

²⁰ CoE Centre of Expertise for Good Governance, 2017, 2020

²¹ Redmond, P., E. Staffa, K. Cipriks, S. McGuinness and O. Gilmore (2023). *Sub-minimum wages in Ireland*, ESRI Research Series 167, Dublin: ESRI, <https://doi.org/10.26504/rs167>

²² Eurostat, 2015; Government of Ireland, 2019; DCYA, 2020

²³ CSO, 2009

²⁴ CSO, 2017; Eurostat, 2017; Government of Ireland, 2019

²⁵ CSO, 2022c; CSO, 2022d

²⁶ Youth and Political Participation UNDP, 2013, No. 4 Vol. LIV 2017, Global Citizenship, 2018

Recommendations

- 1.1) The ISSU recommends:** Altering or including democratic systems as an independent or combined strand of research for An Comisiún to consider.
- 2.1) The ISSU recommends:** Holistic longitudinal research on political/electoral participation and engagement at the different levels of government.
- 3.1) The ISSU supports:** Research on expanding eligibility for postal voting.
- 3.1) The ISSU recommends:** Research on simplifying and streamlining the application process for arrangements for people with disabilities, illnesses, visual impairments, or reading and writing disabilities and people in geographically secluded locations.
- 4.1) The ISSU supports:** Research into online electoral interference and research to ensure transparency in relation to political advertising.
- 4.1) The ISSU recommends:** Research around anxiety affecting students and how it relates to decisions in elections.
- 5.1) The ISSU recommends:** Researching lowering the voting age to 16
- 5.1) The ISSU recommends:** Researching the impact and successes of civic education, the experiences of other states, and its successful implementation on the political and civic participation of the population.
- 5.2) The ISSU recommends:** Research on a minimum requirement of Irish for candidates standing for election.
- 5.3) The ISSU recommends:** The research of resources on the Irish political system with unbiased information in plain and simple language to be made freely available.
- 5.4) The ISSU supports:** The research of electoral participation of under-reached groups including increasing representation of women, people with disabilities, young people and from diverse ethnic backgrounds and research to measure the diversity of candidates for elections and consider ways to increase this.
- 5.5) The ISSU recommends:** Researching best practice and innovative methods of engaging voters and young people passively or informally in education time effectively for example, passive or daily democratic actions, mock elections, local or constituency engagement events or advertisements.
- 6.1) The ISSU recommends:** Increased emphasis on research around young people and their civic engagement.

ENDS

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Glossary

ISSU - Irish Second-level Students Union

An Comisiún - An Comisiún Toghcháin

UN - United Nations

UNCRC - United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

DE or Dept - Department of Education

SIPTU - Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union

FÓRSA - 'Force', the Irish trade union for the public service

ICTU - Irish Congress of Trade Unions

NYCI - National Youth Council of Ireland

CoE - The Council of Europe

CB - An Chomhdháil Bhliantúil, the ISSU's largest statutory event

CSPE - Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) is an optional Junior Certificate course in active citizenship based on human rights and social responsibilities.

IPA(s) - International Protection Applicant(s)

C&C - Community and Comprehensive

CSO - Central Statistics Office

DCEDIY - Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

DCYA - Department of Children and Youth Affairs (now DCEDIY)

DE - Department of Education (Now DoE)

DEIS - Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools

DES - Department of Education and Skills (Now DoE)

DFHERIS - Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

DoE - Department of Education

EAL - English as an Additional Language

EEF - Education Endowment Foundation

EFTA - European Free Trade Association

ERC - Educational Research Centre

ESRI - Economic and Social Research Institute

ETB - Education and Training Board

EU - European Union

FE - Further Education

FET - Further Education and Training

GDP - Gross Domestic Product

HSCL - Home School Community Liaison

HEA - Higher Education Authority

IBEC - Irish Business and Employers Confederation

IMF - International Monetary Fund

JCSP - Junior Cycle Schools Programme

L+N - Literacy and Numeracy

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NAPD - National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals

NERI - Nevin Economic Research Institute

NFER - National Foundation for Educational Research

OECD - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PIAAC - Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies

PIRLS - Programme in International Reading Literacy Study

PISA - Programme for International Student Assessment

SDG - Sustainable Development Goal

SEN - Special Educational Needs

SJI - Social Justice Ireland

SSE - School Self-Evaluation

TIMSS - Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study

TUI - Teachers' Union of Ireland

UNDP - United Nations Development Programme

UNESCO - United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation

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