



Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

Grant Reform Position Paper

April 2018

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Introduction

Equity of access to higher education is a core component of the work of the Union of Students in Ireland (USI). The support structures we have at present are not working optimally and there have been significant cuts to the Student Maintenance Grant over the last decade, a time where the cost of living has increased and rental accommodation costs have risen on average 9.5% per annum, in 2017 rental accommodation costs were 7% above their peak level recorded in 2007. The proposals in this paper seek to rectify some of the inequalities and problems that exist with the current requirements in relation to the Student Maintenance Grant.

Grants Thresholds and rates

Increasing the threshold and allocation given through the Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grant scheme.

The DIT Campus Life survey (2017) details that on average the total cost to attend third level education in Dublin is €12,495 per annum. [While USI expresses its gratitude in extending and increasing eligibility for grants in recent years – especially in Budget 2017 towards postgraduates](#), unfortunately these measures don't go far enough..

PLC & Undergraduate Grant Levels (Maintenance Levels)

Levels of Grant	Maintenance Non-Adjacent Rate 2011/12	Maintenance Adjacent Rate 2011/12	Maintenance Non-Adjacent Rate 2017/18	Maintenance Adjacent Rate 2017/18 (€)
PLC & Undergraduate Grant Levels (Maintenance Levels)				
	€	€	€	€
Special Rate of Maintenance Grant	6,100	2,445	5,915	2,375
Standard Rate 100% Maintenance	3,120	1,250	3,025	1,215
Standard Rate 75% Maintenance	2,340	940	2,270	910
Standard Rate 50% Maintenance	1,560	625	1,515	605
Standard Rate 25% Maintenance	780	315	755	305

Source: <https://susi.ie/>

The [DIT campus life survey](#) outlines that the monthly expenditure, excluding fees for a student living away from home is €1,222, this does not come close to being met, even by the highest rate of €678 per month. [A Strategy for Funding Higher Education](#) (2016) states that an additional €100 million would be needed to fund student financial aid. This funding must ensure that the rate of grant is increased to match in the increased cost of living. Thresholds must also be adjusted to allow middle income earners to be able to access the SUSI grant.

Recommendation:

- For the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to restore the grant thresholds to their pre-Budget 2011 rates.
- That the grant rates should be increased to reflect the rise in the cost of living.

Grant Adjacency Rates

Reverse Budget 2011 cuts

USI recognises the need to reverse the decision taken in Budget 2011 and decrease the qualifying distance for the non-adjacent rate of the grant from 45km to 24km. The current qualifying distance of 45km intends to take into account a reasonable distance which students may commute on a daily basis. However this puts many students at an disadvantage - especially those from outside major urban areas for various reasons.

Some rural public transport links are poor to the point that students miss early or late lectures. Example: Birr Co. Offaly, population 5,741 is 40km from its nearest third level institution, Athlone Institute of Technology (AIT). The earliest a student can arrive in AIT using by direct bus is 1.25pm.

The adjacent grant exists to provide maintenance for those who are capable of commuting and provides for students, the cost of travel may be comparable to a living cost in the college town, defeating the purpose of this rate.

Example: Killarney, Co.Kerry, population 14,504 is 36 km from its nearest third level institution, IT Tralee. The cost of using public transport to travel from Killarney to IT Tralee is

€67.50 per week by bus or €75 per week by train. Student accommodation in Tralee is available from €70.00 per week in Kings Court Student Accommodation.

Recommendations:

- For the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to restore the grant adjacency rates to the pre-Budget 2011 rate of 24km.
- A rural exemption or decrease in rate for rural colleges with poor transport links.
- Introduce Free Travel Card for grant and BTEA recipients.

Residential Issues

Impact of the criteria of living in Ireland 3 out of the last 5 years

Students who have not lived in Ireland or another EU member state for 3 of the last 5 years do not qualify for EU tuition fee levels or the student maintenance grant, regardless of their nationality and/or citizenship. This policy has particularly affected the many young people who emigrated from Ireland during the economic crisis and are now returning.

In 2016 Ireland had a total net migration rate of 3,100, up from -11,600 the previous year. The number of immigrants with Irish nationality increased from 12,100 to 21,100 in the year to April, an increase of more than 74%.

	Year ending	
	April 2015	April 2016
Immigration	69,300	79,300
Emigration	80,900	76,200
Net migration	-11,600	3,100
<i>of which Irish nationals</i>	<i>-23,200</i>	<i>-10,700</i>

Year ending April / Nationality	Immigrants						Year ending April / Age	Immigrants						
	2011 ¹	2012 ²	2013 ²	2014 ²	2015 ²	2016 ²		2011 ¹	2012 ²	2013 ²	2014 ²	2015 ²	2016 ²	2011 ¹
Persons							Persons							
Irish	19.6	20.6	15.7	11.6	12.1	21.1	0 - 14	6.1	7.9	9.3	7.8	12.8	12.4	5.3
UK	4.1	2.2	4.9	4.9	5.0	4.5	15 - 24	14.6	14.6	12.9	15.9	14.7	19.7	34.5
Rest of EU15 ³	7.1	7.2	7.4	8.7	8.9	10.0	25 - 44	26.9	25.6	28.6	33.0	36.7	41.4	31.3
EU13 ⁴	10.1	10.4	10.9	10.0	12.8	12.0	45 - 64	4.3	4.1	4.6	2.8	4.0	4.3	6.1
Rest of world	12.4	12.4	17.1	25.5	30.4	31.8	65 and over	1.3	0.6	0.4	1.1	1.1	1.4	3.4
Total persons	53.3	52.7	55.9	60.6	69.3	79.3	Total persons	53.3	52.7	55.9	60.6	69.3	79.3	80.6

Source: www.cso.ie (2016)

To prove eligibility to SUSI, in both the [independent](#) and [nationality residency](#) criterion, an applicant must be resident in an EEA state for three of the five years prior to starting a course, in order to be eligible. The current guidelines state there are no exceptions to this rule.

This criterion creates a disincentive for migrants wanting to return to Ireland by imposing an excessive financial burden to their access to higher level education in Ireland.

USI welcome that refugees have now access to the SUSI grant system however, this residency criteria also directly affects refugees who have entered Ireland seeking asylum. With this added to the poor financial supports for those living in direct provision, grant support must be extended for refugees.

Recommendations:

- To omit refugees from the criteria outlining that they should be resident for the last 3 out of 5 years in Ireland.
- To reduce the criteria to be resident in Ireland down from 3 out of the last 5 years to 2 of last 5 years to allow for those returning back to Ireland.
- That all Irish Citizens qualify for the EU tuition fee levels regardless of their residency

Residency Evidence

Proving residency with accommodation registered to the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB).

USI has become aware of many issues of students being denied grants due to their privately rented accommodation not being registered with the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB). The Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) is a public body set up to support and develop a well-functioning rental housing sector and they maintain a national registry of tenancies. [SUSI requires that to prove residency](#), one must have a letter confirming that the address is registered with the RTB.

With a student accommodation and housing crisis across Ireland, students have no other choice than to rent accommodation that is not registered. In most cases, students are unaware that the accommodation is not registered with the RTB until it is too late in the process of applying for a grant. This is directly affecting students applying for the grant under the 'Independent' category and leaves many having to reapply under the 'Dependent' category and/or making them ineligible for a grant in either case. In other cases, students are going to the SUSI appeals board stage and being successful after months of financial strain of being without grant supports.

Recommendation:

- To build more awareness of RTB registration requirement and it's links to grant.
- To relax the rule around RTB registration and to look at other evidence in order to allow earlier access to grant.

Younger Independent Students

Students not dependent on their parents between the ages of 18-23.

[By SUSI's definition](#), an 'Independent' Student must be "23 years of age or over on Jan 1st of the year when you first enter/re-enter further or higher education." The 'Dependent' classification in the current system is divided into two categories, 'Mature Dependent' and 'Dependent', while the Independent classification only has the one category.

In the current SUSI system, students who are legal adults (18+ years) and support themselves through college, cannot be assessed as independent adults, unless they are mature students or have proof of estrangement. This omits a large category of students who are not dependent on their parents between the ages of 18-23.

On top of this, students are required to inform SUSI of change in circumstances but this does not allow for a transition to financially independent living.

Recommendation:

- That anyone over the age of 18 can be eligible to be assessed as 'Independent' if they meet all other criteria.
- That applicants should be able to transition between being classified as a 'Dependent' and an 'Independent'.

Extension of Grant Support

Private colleges to be included in the SUSI grant scheme

The [current criteria](#) for grant support is firstly based on what education institution a student attends. USI believes that grants should be made available to students based on each individual circumstance on meeting the other required criteria rather than on what education institution they attend. The current criteria is inequitable and a barrier to those trying to attend some third-level institutions.

There are currently 9 institutions listed on the SUSI website not eligible for funding although they are offered through the CAO

Recommendation:

- That grant supports should be extended to offer students in private institutions the same opportunity to apply for financial support.

Grants for Part-Time students

USI urges the Government to commit to part-time students receiving the same supports that would be available to full-time students in similar circumstances.

A number of support funds, including the Fund for Student with Disabilities, the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) and the Maintenance Grant are only available for students studying on a full-time basis in recognised Higher Education Institution.

According to the [HEA Eurostat Survey \(2016\)](#), of the expenses being paid by students, the average expenses for part-time students (at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level) was higher than full-time students.

It is unfair to punish students who are trying to further themselves through studying but due to circumstance cannot commit to attend a higher education institution in a full-time capacity. The SUSI grant system must be expanded to include these students.

Recommendation:

- That the same grant supports for full-time students be extended and offered to part-time students who qualify under the other criteria.

Postgraduate Grants

Reverse Budget 2011 cuts for Postgraduates grants

USI acknowledges the need to fully reinstate the postgraduate grant. The postgraduate maintenance grant was abolished in Budget 2012 and replaced by a postgraduate fee contribution of between €2,000 and €6,270 depending on income with thresholds of €31,500 and €22,703 respectively.

Investing in National Ambition: A strategy for funding higher education stated “The removal of maintenance supports for postgraduate students is of particular concern and there is a real risk that some socio-economic groups could be locked out of a range of professions such as teaching as a result.” The programme for a Partnership Government contained a commitment “to increase support for postgraduates with a particular focus on those from low income households.”

USI welcome the introduction of the full maintenance grant worth almost €6,000 from September 2017 for 1,100 postgraduate students in the lowest income category. However, USI call on the Government to fully reinstate postgraduate grants to all those who would be eligible for a postgraduate grant.

Recommendation

- To fully reverse the cuts made in Budget 2011 to cut postgraduate grants.