



Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

***Submission to the Department of Health on access to
contraception in Ireland***

About USI

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) is the sole representative body for students in Ireland and represents 374000 students in over thirty member colleges across Ireland, North and South. Throughout its history, USI has worked relentlessly in the pursuit of student rights in all areas of the student experience. The goal of USI is to work for the rights of students and a fair and equal third-level education system in Ireland.

USI is a full member of the European Students' Union (ESU) which represents students from 46 National Students' Unions in 39 countries, and a member of Eurodoc, the European Council for Doctoral Candidates and Junior Researchers.

Introduction

USI are welcoming this opportunity to write a submission to the Department of Health. Sexual health and access to contraception has always been a core part of the work of USI.

USI and the HSE has a valued partnership which allows USI to roll-out a National Sexual Health Awareness and Guidance (SHAG) campaigns and this year 30,000 condoms were delivered to students on campuses across Ireland. The aim of SHAG is to raise awareness to third level students about the following:

- Contraception
- STI's

- Consensual sex
- Relationships
- LGBTQ+ sexual education
- The effect of drugs and alcohol with consent
- Support services for victims of sexual assault, violence and rape
- MyOptions Helpline

Students' Unions around the country use the resources provided by USI through our partnership with the HSE to educate students on their campus about the topics highlighted above through their own SHAG Campaigns. Each campaign run by local Students' Unions and USI has a huge impact in spreading awareness about sexual health. USI welcome the introduction of the national condom distribution service (NCDS) from the HSE that hopes to be rolled out to all HEI's by 2020.

USI has a long history of campaigning for access to abortion services here in Ireland. USI continues to have a clear stance to campaign for access to free, safe and legal abortion services when a woman's life is at risk, including from suicide or if a foetus has a fatal abnormality and cannot survive. USI believes that access to contraception is viewed as essential for good sexual health and wellbeing among third level students.

This public consultation was carried out in a questionnaire style, there is additional documentation below and answers to the questions.

Questionnaire:

Q1 Organisation details:

Union of Students in Ireland (USI) is a representative body located on 14 Mount Street Upper, Dublin 2.

Róisín O'Donovan, Vice President for Welfare completed the online questionnaire.

Section 1: Implementing the recommendations of the joint committee

Q2 Factors that will inform the development of a scheme to increase access to contraception. From 1 to 6 on how important, 1 being the most important:

1. Ensuring equal access to all
2. The cost to individual
3. How effective each contraception is
4. Meeting different needs
5. Meeting different preferences
6. The cost to the state

Q3 Are there any other factors you think are important?

Promotion of the scheme will be vital to ensure effective use and that it reaches everyone. There needs to be a strong and effective national campaign, online and offline to promote the scheme. USI is committed to working closely with the Department of Health and other organisations to promote this scheme to as many third level students as possible.

Q4 What do you think might be the benefits of providing the scheme described above?

1. Empower young people to take control of their contraception needs, this will be achieved by removing the cost barrier.
2. Lower the rate of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI's) - students are one of the most at-risk groups (20 - 34 year-olds)¹.
3. Minority and socio-economic disadvantaged groups will be reached by implementing a free of charge and accessible scheme.
4. Reduced number of people seeking abortions.

Q5 What do you think some of the challenges will be?

1. Resourcing - Adequate training for doctors, nurses, pharmacists, primary care and other related facilities and managing the scheme.
2. Reaching minority groups.

Q6 To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following?

In relation to barrier methods of contraception (male / female condoms, diaphragms and caps), short-acting hormonal methods (the pill, vaginal ring and the patch) and reversible methods (intra-uterine system, intra - uterine device, injections and the implant)

The Current situation: Individuals pay for all barrier methods themselves.

Free of charge: All barrier methods should be free-of-charge to all residents of Ireland.

Co-Payment: All barrier methods should be co-paid, partly paid by the government and partly paid by the individual.

- Strongly disagreed to the current situation.
- Strongly Agreed to the Free of charge scheme.
- Strongly disagree with a co-payment and current situation.

Section 3 - Barriers and Delivery

Q9 In your opinion what are the main barriers to accessing contraception in Ireland?

1. Cost
2. Lack of education and religious bias in sex ed in secondary schools
3. Stigma around sexual health in Ireland

¹ HPSC weekly HIV and STI report available at:

https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/hivstis/sexuallytransmittedinfections/publications/stireports/stiweeklyreports/Weekly_HIV_&_STI_report_Week%2030.pdf

4. Lack of resources, particularly in the health sector

Further comments:

The cost of contraception is a huge barrier for students in third level education. With the second highest fees in Europe and soaring accommodation costs, students are under immense pressure to stay in education with the cost of living already being nearly €12,000² a year when you're living away from home. The cost of contraception is a weekly to monthly burden for many students in higher education.

One of the biggest cost issues is that long acting reversible contraception, such as implants, patches, IUDs, etc which are the most effective are more expensive. Emergency contraception is also a significant cost for students. Below is a table of the costs of contraception for students.

Table 1: Contraception types and costs³

Contraception type	Cost range
The Pill	€84 - €175 per year
Emergency contraception	€33 - €200
Copper Coil	€230 - €280
Injectable contraception	€60 - €80
Implant	€180 - €260
Diaphragm	€20 - €120

USI have been discussing the poor education delivered to students in secondary school for years. We strongly believe there is an urgent need to remove religious ethos from the relationships and sexuality education curriculum. USI believes that the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) curriculum has to be delivered factually and objectively and that the curriculum will have to cover contraception, sexuality, gender, LGBTQ+ issues and consent. The Rape Crisis Network Ireland, National Women's Council of Ireland, Shout Out,

² TU Dublin Cost of Living guide, available at: <https://www.dit.ie/campuslife/studentssupport/costoflivingguide/>

³ Cost of Contraception, available at: <https://www.ifpa.ie/ifpa-contraception-price-list/>

USI, Irish Family Planning Association, Atheist Ireland, LadyBirds, and the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre have all indicated their support for the sexual education bill⁴.

ISSU⁵ conducted a survey on the quality of sex education for second-level students. The results of the survey were deeply concerning regarding contraception, some of which are included here:

- 28.1% of students stated that they received no information about contraception in school.
- Of 71.9% who answered yes, male condoms and the contraceptive pill were the two most discussed forms of contraception
- The least discussed were the Long acting reversible contraception such as the patch, copper coils, diaphragm and the implant
- 78.1% were not taught how to use contraception.

Students in second level should be receiving information about contraception in school. These results show that although there are high results for condoms and the contraceptive pill, other forms of contraception are not being adequately discussed. All options should be given to students. USI and ISSU believes that there should be practical advice on how to safely use condoms and other types of contraception as part of a revised RSE module.

Q11 Please state to what extent you agree or disagree with the statement:

‘Increased access to condoms is needed in Ireland’

- Strongly agree

Q12 Please provide further details on increasing access to condoms

Further comments

USI is committed to working with the HSE on the NCDS. At the moment, Students’ Unions across Ireland provide free male condoms to students but this service is limited due to the opening and closing times of Students’ Unions. We believe condoms should be more widely available on college campuses, in suitable locations such as in all student health centres, Students’ Unions, bathrooms and common room areas. USI encourage the scheme to include access to female condoms as well to promote LGBTQ+ inclusivity. Along with this, correct information and guidance needs to be given about how to put on condoms, correct disposal and allergen information. USI encourages all Higher Education Institutions’s to be supportive of the NCDS and additional information.

Q13 Who should be responsible for ensuring patient safety and high quality care in relation to contraception? Please state to what extent you are in favour of or against the different

⁴ Article available at:

<https://www.her.ie/news/students-share-horrific-experiences-sex-education-irish-schools-398454>

⁵ Irish Second Level Students’ Union, available at: <https://www.issu.ie/>

options for accessing short-acting hormonal contraception (contraceptive pills, vaginal ring and contraceptive patch) through the health service:

- Neutral for all

Further Comments

USI are not clinical experts in this area so refrained from agreeing or disagreeing with the options provided. However we are in-line with the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCi) view, that providing contraception should be available in all appropriate locations in line with clinical guidance and it's crucial people have access to safe contraception. The scheme must be flexible and contraception should be provided in a setting that students feel most comfortable to get contraception. Free consultations for students should be provided to encourage a conversation around their options for contraception and for the best quality service.

Q14 To what extent do you agree or disagree that more doctors and nurses should be trained to provide long acting reversible methods of contraception (LARC) (IUS, IUD, injection and implant) through the health service:

- Strongly agree

Q15 To what extent do you agree or disagree that pharmacists should be trained to provide injectable forms of long acting reversible contraception (LARC) in addition to doctors or nurses.

- Strongly agree

Q16 Do you have anything further to add on **who** should be delivering contraception?

No

Q17 Given that the health budget is limited and that there are competing demands for resources, how important do you think it is to invest in the development of a scheme "for the provision of the most effective method of contraception, free of charge and having regard to personal circumstances, to all people who wish to avail of them within the State?"

- Extremely high importance

Closing comments and recommendations

USI would like to thank the Department of Health for this opportunity have the student voice reflected in this scheme. To summarise the key asks from USI on behalf of all third level students in Ireland are:

- The provision of free contraception, a free of charge scheme is most favourable and necessary for students
- The urgent removal of religion bias from the sex education curriculum in secondary schools. The curriculum has to be delivered factually and objectively and that the

curriculum will have to cover contraception, sexuality, gender, LGBTQ+ issues and consent

- This scheme must be inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community
- USI encourage all HEI's to be supportive of increasing access of male and female condoms on campuses to third level students
- Contraception should be available in all appropriate locations in line with clinical guidance and it's crucial that students have access to safe contraception by providing free consultations

The Union of Students in Ireland is committed to representing students across the Island to ensure they are fully supported throughout their education. We believe these improvements to access to contraception will have a positive impact on student health, well-being and overall educational experience.

If you have any questions about this submission you can contact the President of USI, Lorna Fitzpatrick (president@usi.ie / - 087 276 3941) or Roisin O'Donovan, Vice President for Welfare(welfare@usi.ie / 087 2809 703)