

BTEA Reform Proposals

USI shall lobby the Department of Social Protection for the reform of administration of the Back to Education Allowance on the basis of the following experiential recommendations:

Review of BTEA system

The Vice President for Welfare has primary responsibility for issues in relation to the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) as laid out in the Financial Representation Protocol. This Reform Proposal mandates the VP Welfare to carry out a review of the BTEA with the Department of Social Protection in order to understand if the current system is working for the benefit of the students who need it. Upon completion of the review, a report on potential reform of the BTEA should be made available to National Council.

Sharing of application information

SUSI and the relevant Government Departments should engage in data sharing, allowing for cross-referencing of applications to ensure that students are not awarded both the Back to Education Allowance and the SUSI maintenance grant, and subsequently asked to repay one.

Electronic filing and application

Documentation should be kept electronically as well as in paper form. This would prevent the loss of documentation and reduce the complicated paper trail. Students should also be given the choice of applying for BTEA and submitting appeals electronically. This would ensure that the people reviewing the documentation would receive documentation immediately and would be able to review much more efficiently.

Root and Branch review of existing guidelines

Current guidelines should be reviewed with a view to creating detailed but straightforward guidelines for use by every social welfare office. In tandem with better training for social welfare officers, this should achieve consistency in advice and decisions. Each social welfare office should conduct an annual review as to the fulfilment of these guidelines, and as to their suitability.

BTEA Training for social welfare officers

Training should be provided for social welfare officers to more effectively manage casework. This would ensure consistency between social welfare offices and prevent the situation whereby different information and advice is provided by different social welfare officers. This training should also be available to USI member organisations to guide their casework. Training should address, but not be limited to:

- Active listening and managing sensitive casework;
- Interpreting and communicating guidelines;
- Providing prospective applicants with a complete picture of their options for study, including institution type, course type, and course duration.

The establishment of a “hotline” service on the model of the SUSI-USI service

In accordance with existing organisation policy, USI shall lobby the Department of Social Protection to designate a contact or contacts tasked with liaising with students’ union officers

on casework issues. This should function along similar lines to the phone-in support available to MOs from SUSI.

Introduce expectations management

USI shall liaise with the Department of Social Protection to introduce indicative timeframes for the following:

- Review of applications and response;
- Response to queries from applications and their representatives;
- Completion of appeals process.

Standardise return to BTEA

USI shall lobby the Department of Social Protection to amend the requirement that recipients of BTEA who switch to illness benefits must remain on the new payment for twelve months before they are eligible to revert to BTEA. For the purposes of standardisation this should be reduced to twelve months.

Payment structure

Currently the payment structure that is in place is not adequate to support those who are receiving the BTEA. USI shall lobby the Department of Social Protection to reform this system and will also seek to get clarification on what students are entitled to receive if they are working while receiving the BTEA and how it will affect their payments.