

A Student Manifesto for Election 2020

BREAK
THE
BARRIERS

U S I
Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

President's Foreword

A chara,

General Election 2020 is a moment when we can truly affect change and create an Ireland that we are proud to call home.

Some of the key issues facing our members across the island of Ireland are contained within these pages. We are calling on all candidates in this General Election to consider them fully and engage with us to see them become more than just words on a page. We can no longer continue to simply talk about the importance of an accessible and quality education system, an equal health system, a sustainable society and a welcoming nation, we need our elected representatives to take action to ensure these are felt by every student across the country.



The Union of Students in Ireland has relentlessly and tirelessly lobbied on issues that affect our members from student fees which will shortly be the highest in the EU following Brexit to the inequalities that have and continue to exist within our society. Students have been at the forefront of recent referenda and we are ready to be heard at the ballot boxes on the 8th of February.

Students want to know that the people they elect to Dáil Éireann care about the issues that affect them. We will elect the change-makers who will action the promises they make when they knock on the door because for far too long students have been hard done by the policies of the past and we are demanding a better future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Fitzpatrick', written over a thin horizontal line.

Lorna Fitzpatrick
USI President

Acknowledgements

The Executive Team would like to acknowledge the contribution of students and their leaders from across Ireland who have contributed to the debate around our positions in the lead up to the General Election.

Further, the Executive Team would like to thank all the political activists and elected representatives who have engaged with USI on policy in recent years. As a democratic organisation, we appreciate the constructive engagement of elected representatives on the important causes of the Student Movement and look forward to engaging again through the election campaign and thereafter.

Access to Quality Education

Too many students are priced out of study.

USI wishes to see a commitment from elected representatives to creating a truly accessible third-level education sector that champions equality of opportunity and outcomes for all our people.

This should encompass, but not be limited to, providing financial supports to enable everybody to access education, ensuring that students have access to suitable and affordable accommodation while studying, putting in place standards for the pay and working conditions of postgraduate research students, and, placing students at the centre of any future changes to the sector.

More specifically, USI would welcome commitment to the following items:

USI's Proposed Solutions

- Improve access to third-level education through the removal of the student contribution charges imposed on apprentices and higher education students, and replace these with state contribution.

- Review the SUSI grant scheme, taking into account annual cost of living and the need for investment in the Postgraduate SUSI Grant. Address the shortfall in funding to the Student Assistance Fund. Increase the funding allocated to the Back to Education Allowance and broaden the range of postgraduate courses covered under this scheme.

- Through investment and policy, recognize that education is a key right, not a product to be sold or purchased.

- Provide HEIs with funding to build affordable Publicly owned purpose built student accommodation, thus easing pressure on the private market.

- Currently students living in "digs style" accommodation have very few rights of tenure or enforceable rights at all during their stay. We need this addressed; students living in homes deserve to be treated as the tenants they are.

- Commit to the development of a National Student Partnership Agreement that sets out a plan for embedding and valuing the student voice at a local and national level. Develop a framework for supporting Students' Unions and recognise their status as autonomous representative bodies in legislation.

- Recognize the rights of Postgraduate Research Students through the introduction of a national minimum wage, transitioning towards a living wage. Support recognition of the USI-SIPTU Postgraduate Working Rights Charter in all Higher Education Institutions.

An Equal Health System

A healthier people benefits the whole nation.

USI would like to see a health system that is fit for purpose and that can support students throughout third level education.

USI wants the government to create a trusted system, where there is no doubt that students will receive quality healthcare. USI strongly urges an equal health system where no student is left behind and the system is open and accessible to everyone.

USI mental health reports states that 34% of students who responded stated that they were clinically diagnosed with severe depression. We call on the government to prevent that number from rising, and create an equal and trusted health system.

USI's Proposed Solutions

- Expand provision of health services in rural areas, including specialist services such as mental and sexual health facilities.
- Invest in 24-hour specialist mental health services, that are accessible to anyone who is in need of support.
- Implement trans-inclusive healthcare practice in Ireland, in line with the 'informed consent' model proposed by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health's standards of care for in treating transgender and non-binary people.
- Treat drug use and addiction as a healthcare issue, not a criminal justice issue by decriminalising drug use and investing in specialist care for those battling addiction.
- End the discriminatory 12-month deferral period on blood donation for men who have sex with men, ensuring that blood donation is available to everyone who meet all other criteria.
- Free sustainable period products
- Ensure those with a disability can work and live independently while increasing investment in disability support services to support the increasing number of students with disabilities in third level.

A Sustainable Society

One small green island can lead the world.

As part of our general election manifesto, we call on candidates to realise the responsibility they have to ensure a fair and sustainable society in Ireland.

Issues such as homelessness, climate action and other social justice issues have a devastating impact on the day to day lives of students and wider members of society.

Urgent action is required on a wide range of issues highlighted below and we implore that any candidate seeking election would ensure that these measures are enacted on with an immediate effect.

USI's Proposed Solutions

- Tackle the housing and homelessness crisis and build more social housing on public land.
- Face the reality of the damaging effects of climate change and introduce measures such as banning offshore fuel drilling and comprehensive waste reduction strategies to ensure a sustainable country for future generations.
- Radically overhaul Ireland's electoral practices to ensure they are more accessible to everyone; encompassing automatic voter registration, votes at 16 and a reform of the Seanad.
- Introduce free public transport for all third-level students throughout the duration of their studies, and invest in improved public transport services, particularly in rural areas.
- Introduce robust hate crime legislation that is needed to protect minority groups and the most vulnerable people in Irish society.
- Modernize Ireland's licensing laws for the 21st century to combat the decline in the culture economy. Furthermore, engage with the Give Us The Night campaign to help build a nighttime economy in Ireland.
- Demand more concrete rights for Irish speakers when using State Services.
- Reform Irish in the education system from pre-school to third level, based off the Common European Framework for Languages.
- Ensure that people across all sectors of society have the right to safe working conditions and a living wage and end precarious and low pay work.

A Welcoming Nation

Help those who choose to make Ireland home.

USI wishes to see Ireland live up to its global reputation as 'the land of a hundred thousand welcomes' in its treatment of asylum seekers and refugees who come to Ireland seeking a better life.

We would welcome commitments from candidates to improving access to third-level education for asylum seekers and refugees, and to ending the inhumane system of direct provision.

USI's Proposed Solutions

- Implement the findings of the Oireachtas Committee on Equality and Justice report on direct provision, and replace the current system of Direct Provision with a new model that is compliant with UN Human Rights standards.
- Formally recognize the Places of Sanctuary programme, and provide support to towns, cities and local communities wishing to roll out initiatives in support of asylum seekers and refugees in their area.
- Introduce legal protections to exempt people in formal education from deportation orders for the duration of their studies.
- Reform the criteria for the free fees initiative and state grants systems to ensure that asylum seekers and refugees are entitled to the same supports as domestic students.

A government which values students

Education gives so much to Ireland

When Ireland invests in students and in education, it invests in the future of the society and the future of the whole world. As a nation we should be proud of our students and excited to see what we'll achieve in the future.

Educational funding in Ireland has been managed by fits and starts, as occasional boosts to the economy or to solve political problems for government. Too often, education is seen as a problem to be dealt with - a 'demographic time bomb', a drain on the national resources and the source of problems. This is wrongheaded and stymies Ireland's potential.

If education was recognised for the opportunity it presents - as a driver for the improvement of the prospects of the whole society, a key economic driver and a catalyst for the reputational and influential growth of the nation, it would unleash the full force and optimism of an educated, engaged youth.

In our manifesto we have asked all the parties to prioritise the nation's future - breaking the barriers that prevent people from seeing their future in apprenticeships and higher education. We have asked the parties to commit to building the accommodation students will need if they are to make the most of the opportunities education presents. We have asked the parties to support the postgraduates who will undertake the research our nation will need to lead the world of the future.

There is a deeply practical and ethical thread running through the student manifesto. Whilst we focus on elements of healthcare most proximate to the student experience, we call for investment in rural healthcare, a greater emphasis in out of hours services to reduce reliance on A&E, an end to the MSM blood donation ban and a new approach to people dealing with drug addiction.

We call on the government to squarely confront climate change and to lead the way in the development of environmental sustainability.

As the first generation to really feel the impact of climate change we ask the next government to place the policies to tackle it at the top of the agenda. All policies should be tested against the need to secure a sustainable society and set an example to the world.

We call for the government to follow the lead of successful nations in introducing free public transport for students in cities and more rural transport provision.

We see reform of the licencing laws to make our towns safer and introduction of robust hate crime legislation as necessary steps in the development of a future-ready Ireland.

And finally, USI wants to see Ireland live up to its historic promise as the land of céad míle fáilte. When asylum seekers and refugees arrive in Ireland, seeking escape from tyrannies and danger, they seek out opportunities to study and learn, and to earn a living for their families. Too often, we offer them neither.

USI wants Ireland to meet that desire to contribute in a spirit of community and practicality - let people study and gain qualifications. End the shameful current Direct Provision system and guarantee that students duly enrolled in a recognised and approved course of education can stay to complete the course.

USI believes that Ireland has much to gain from becoming a welcoming education-focused world leader in sustainability, with services to support people who want to contribute.

We welcome the support of any candidate able to agree to our positions and we wish those who stand for election the best of luck.



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