



Union of Students in Ireland

Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

**Written Submission to the Oireachtas Special Committee on
COVID-19 Response.**

June 2020

1. The Union of Students in Ireland

The Union of Students in Ireland (Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn) is the national representative body for third-level Students' Unions in Ireland. Founded in 1959, USI now represents more than 374,000 students in over thirty colleges across the island of Ireland. 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.

2. Background to this submission

Since the closure of all third-level institutions in March 2020 as a result of public health advice in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, USI have engaged in the Tertiary Education Sector's COVID-19 response groups. USI is represented on most of the key groups including the Steering Group, and Immediate Operations Group.

USI have also held regular meetings with member students' unions to stay abreast of the issues impacting students at a local level - and have worked constructively with key stakeholders across the sector and elected representatives to address numerous issues that have arisen such as payment for frontline workers on placement, connectivity issues and assessment. USI conducted a survey of students in June focusing on three key areas: teaching, learning and assessment; finance and accommodation, and mental health & wellbeing. Some of the high-level results of this survey are referenced in our response below.

USI welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Oireachtas Special Committee on COVID-19 response. USI's response is broken into a number of key areas of focus:

Teaching & Learning, Student Accommodation, Higher Education Funding, International Students, and Research.

3. USI Response to COVID-19

COVID-19 has caused unimaginable disruption to the education landscape and the general well being of the society in which we live.

Students have faced unprecedented challenges during this time and protections and supports must be put in place to ensure they can enter and return to education in 2020. Students were at the forefront of the national response to COVID-19, from working in sectors such as healthcare and retail, to engaging in research to support innovative responses to the virus. Now, the Government must repay the favour by supporting students.

The lack of reference to third-level students in Government communication during this period has been met with a great sense of frustration and disappointment by students. Although the Government's relationship with third-level institutions differs from that of primary and secondary level in regards to institutional autonomy, the lack of reference to the sector in Government briefings has left many students feeling like a low priority in the eyes of their elected representatives.

As we gradually move out of lockdown, there is still a great deal of uncertainty about what the next six months will look like and students share this feeling. Many are concerned about what the next academic year will look like, those who are graduating do so with a sense of trepidation given the likelihood of an economic downturn over the coming years, new entrants are unsure of what to expect from their Higher Education experience. Many students have lost employment as a result of COVID-19, and will find themselves financially worse off upon entering or returning to college in September, something that should be reflected in the financial support made available to them.

Given all of the above, there is a need to consider the funding of mental health services, not just for those due to return to college but for those leaving college who may feel that their final year experience has been tainted by COVID-19 along with those who are still active in the system over the summer months ; most of whom are postgraduate researchers. Meanwhile, there is also a need to consider the impact that COVID-19 has had on school leavers and other students due to commence third-level education in the autumn. The induction experience will be significantly different to that usually experienced by first year students, and there is a need to consider how colleges can continue to build a sense of community for new and returning students in the context of blended learning.

Looking to the future, as we aim to upskill our society and move out of the anticipated economic crisis, tertiary education will have a key role to play in this transition. There is a likelihood of increased enrolments across the tertiary sector in the short and medium term, with an appetite for short-term, flexible courses and apprenticeships that allow workers to quickly reskill to meet the needs of the economy. Student support must not be an afterthought when designing these new programmes, and financial, academic and non-academic supports must be prioritised in the design of new programmes of education.

We will expand on these points in greater detail below.

4. Teaching with social distancing and remote learning

COVID-19 has up-ended traditional ways of working for students and staff alike, disrupting traditional means of course delivery and leading to an emergency online pivot. Credit must be given to all of those who aided the sector's quick response to the crisis, and moved towards 'emergency remote teaching'. That being said, this period has not been without its challenges and it's important that all stakeholders, particularly the Government and third-level institutions recognize the pressures that the online pivot has placed on students and staff alike, and commit to putting in place measures that mitigate against a repeat of the same difficulties, going forward. With social distancing due to remain in the medium-term, and perhaps longer term too, there is a need to consider how the traditional idea of a 'student experience' will be impacted by this drastic change in the delivery of tertiary education.

Many students faced challenges in engaging with learning over the last few months. From lack of access to devices to connectivity issues, and home environments that weren't conducive to effective learning through to students trying to balance caring responsibilities, students have had to overcome significant barriers in continuing their education over the past number of months. With all institutions planning for blended learning in the next semester, students need clarity on how this will look. Students on practically based courses such as Art & Design, labwork, those on practise - based placements, or whose course requires elements of group work, for example are particularly anxious to ensure that they have access to specialist spaces and equipment on campus but social distancing will pose challenges in how many students will be able to access these spaces at once. There is a need to urgently address the digital divide that has affected so many students over the last few months with a fifth of respondents to our survey indicating that they need access to improved wi-fi or digital devices in order to improve their online learning experience.

USI are actively aware of many postgraduates who are themselves continuing to teach or are undertaking demonstrative hours for other undergraduate students, accommodating this work in a new online capacity. There is an urgent need to ensure that these postgraduates and doctoral academic staff have sufficient access

to the right tools, training, supports and equipment required in order to facilitate this online learning.

Higher Education is about more than just what you learn in the classroom and significant thought needs to be put into how a sense of belonging can continue to be fostered amongst students in a scenario where they have limited time on campus. Over a third of respondents to USI's survey indicated that they did not have opportunities with their classmates, formally or informally during the COVID-19 period. Networking and socializing plays a pivotal role in driving the student experience in third-level education, and has an inextricable link with student retention. It's imperative that this is not lost in a blended-learning environment.

A range of additional supports must be made available to students in order to ensure they are fully empowered to achieve their potential. This is particularly pivotal for vulnerable student groups who feature in the National Access Plan and for whom access to on-campus support plays a pivotal role in their journey through Higher Education. Over a third (38.56%) of students cited lack of academic support as one of the main obstacles they encountered over the last few months. As we move towards the Autumn, it's essential that a range of support services can be provided to students who need them, and that students also have full access to a range of books, online journals and additional software packages that enable them to continue with their learning. It is also essential that mental health supports such as Counselling are available to students at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Over a fifth (22.1%) of students indicated a preference for face-to-face counselling services therefore support should be offered to enable colleges to offer counselling and other mental health services through a variety of modes, including face to face in the Autumn. The overall professional support services staff and administrative staff inclusive of postgraduate lecturers, demonstrative staff and advisories must be supported to ensure the overall student experience can be maintained and supported.

5. Student accommodation challenges

As the country moved into lockdown earlier this year, many students were forced to quickly move from their term-time accommodation. Just under half (48.33%) of respondents to USI's survey indicated that they moved in with their families as a result of COVID-19. Of those who moved out of their accommodation, many were unable to be released from their leases, forcing them into paying for accommodation that they were no longer using. Given the significant financial challenges that many students have faced as a result of COVID-19, USI is calling on the Government and all TDs to put pressure on private providers to provide refunds to students who moved out as a result of COVID-19.

As institutions begin to prepare for a blended approach to teaching over the next term, many students are uncertain about what this will look like, and, consequently, whether there will be a need to acquire accommodation for the forthcoming academic term. Clarity should be offered to students as soon as possible in order to allow those who need to, to access accommodation.

With social distancing remaining in place for the foreseeable future, it's important that all accommodation providers, both colleges and private companies put in place measures to guarantee the safety of their residents. With much of the purpose built student accommodation consisting of cluster-bedroom style apartments, it is likely that capacity will need to be reduced in order to ensure social distancing requirements are met. Specific guidelines must be made available by the government to ensure accommodation providers are protecting the safety of students living there. It is essential that these regulations are closely followed, and that students are not charged extra to make up for the loss of income that providers will incur as a result.

Looking forward, there are numerous issues that need to be addressed in order to ensure a fairer housing market for all, particularly for students. USI believes that a rent freeze should be put in place until at least 2022 and should apply to all properties in Ireland, including Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA). The deficit of rights afforded to student tenants, particularly those living in PBSAs and Digs style accommodation also needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

6. Funding challenges – exchequer and non-exchequer

One of the predicted outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic is a drastic reduction in non-exchequer funding in third-level education. Although it's hard to estimate an exact figure, the HEA has predicted a €500 million shortfall this year and next and the Irish Universities Association have predicted a €181m reduction in International Fee income for the University sector over the next year, this being one of the primary additional sources of income in the tertiary sector. This is particularly concerning given the key role that the tertiary sector has played, and will continue to play in economic recovery and re-skilling coming out of a financial recession.

The current funding difficulties being faced by the sector only serve to highlight the precariousness of a system where international fee income, and other commercial revenue streams are used to fill the gap left by inadequate public investment. The Parliamentary Budgeting Office estimates that funding per undergraduate student enrolled in 2019 in HEA funded institutions was 50% less than in 2008. With student numbers expected to increase over the next few years, this situation will only continue to deteriorate if not urgently addressed.

The reduction in state funding and increase in alternative funding streams which mainly consists of international student fees at both undergraduate and postgraduate level along with additional revenue sources had pushed the education system closer to a commercial venture rather than one of a service providing a public good. This strategy has proven to be a massive risk and has placed our Higher Education Institutions in an unsteady position. The sector is competing internally which is not to the betterment of our society.

As Higher Education Institutions work to operate under diminished budgets, there is a significant risk that the student experience will be impacted by cuts to essential services such as counselling, academic writing centres, disability services or other student-facing support functions. Spending reductions on other functions like staff professional development would also pose a risk for the student experience - particular in the context of blended learning. These student support services must be protected at all costs.

In addition to the aforementioned funding challenges, students also find themselves in a much worse financial position due to the COVID-19 crisis. In our recent survey, just under 30% of students reported having been made redundant as a result of COVID-19. Students who normally rely on summer-time employment through programmes like the J1 Internship, and Gaeltacht Summer Programs will also find themselves financially worse off by the time they return to campus, whilst the decision to cut the Pandemic Unemployment Payment from €350 to €203 a week for part-time workers will affect a disproportionately high number of students. With employment opportunities severely limited, additional financial assistance must be made available to students.

The sustainable funding model required by the Higher Education system has been long discussed and unfortunately, we have seen no clear plan put in place to support education into the future. USI repeats it's call for the introduction of publicly funded education. Higher Education has played a key role in the national response to COVID-19 and should be recognised as providing a public good that benefits our economy but also our society. The introduction of this funding model should be coupled with an annual reduction of the student contribution charge to ensure that the current fee of €3,000, the highest in the EU, is not a barrier to participation.

We support the IUA calls in the Partners in Recovery paper on short term funding to keep the sector afloat. Similar figures for the Technological Sector must be taken into consideration and investment provided in line with the requirements.

Conversations on the future funding of tertiary education must start immediately, with all relevant stakeholders and should be accompanied by immediate investment in the sector in order to provide safety in the short-term. If the tertiary sector is to play a role in transforming Irish society as we move out of lockdown, it's imperative that

nobody is left behind.

7. Issues relating to international students

As has been mentioned above, international students make a significant contribution to the funding of Higher Education in Ireland due to institutions' reliance on their fee income to fill the gap left by successive reductions in state funding. However, it is important that we do not look at international students merely as a source of income, but for the important contribution that they make to the Higher Education landscape, playing a vital role in the development of campus communities within Higher Education. With an expected reduction in international enrolments over the next year, and, presumably for a number of years to come, work must take place to ensure that those who do come here are not subject to a lessened student experience.

There is a need for clarity on how international students will be supported over the next academic year. Of particular importance is how incoming international students who choose to travel here will be supported during the 14-day isolation period. For those studying outside of Dublin, consideration must be given to how they can be supported to travel safely to their destination upon arrival in Ireland. Institutions must be resourced to support international students coming here to adapt to whatever requirements are in place post-pandemic. We welcome that international students in Ireland were eligible to qualify for the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and consider it of the utmost importance that international students continue to have access to financial supports in the aftermath of COVID-19.

8. Student Finance

Students returning and entering higher education this autumn are faced with a number of challenges in terms of their financial situation. Many students have lost employment as a result of COVID-19, and will find themselves financially worse off upon entering or returning to college in September, something that should be reflected in the financial support made available to them.

USI has long called for a review of existing financial supports like SUSI and Back to Education Allowance, and we once again repeat that call. Initial reports from the Department indicate an increase of around 15% in SUSI applications, and we believe this to be reflective of the financial challenges that students are facing in the current environment. That being said, previous submissions on SUSI by USI have highlighted the need to reinstate the grant adjacency rate to the pre-Budget 2011 rate, and to increase SUSI grants to better reflect current costs of living. The need for an urgent review of SUSI funding has never been more important. There is a

further need to ensure that student financial supports are equally available to students from all modes of study. The inadequate funding available to postgraduate, part-time and distance learners must be addressed in any future review of student financial support.

Although postgraduates can apply for SUSI, the current ineligibility rate is a huge concern. Eligibility depends on reckonable income and in order to receive maximum funding (which only stands currently at a maximum of €6270), they must meet the criteria for the Special Rate, where household income and dependency is assessed. Those in receipt of the BTEA or Tuition Students are also not eligible for a maintenance grant. These terms do not acknowledge the differing eligibility circumstances faced by postgraduates, and act as a barrier to the access and feasibility of postgraduate study in Ireland.

The government must urgently review eligibility criteria for students at all levels of study and provide additional financial support to students through the SUSI grant system and Student Assistance Fund.

9. Research funding

Increased funding for Higher Education must include investment for growing research opportunities, which will play a vital role in enhancing Ireland's knowledge economy and enable Irish society to better tackle emerging issues as we move out of the COVID-19 lockdown.

The precarity of employment faced by the Postgraduate community must be addressed. Implementation of the USI & SIPTU 14 point Postgraduate Charter across all HEI's, or an otherwise collective Institutional agreement to better the working conditions for Postgraduates across all sectors that incorporates the points listed within the USI & SIPTU Postgrad Charter must be a priority. As a sector, we rely heavily on the postgraduate community for their research and teaching but they are not supported to the extent that they require and face instances of worrying precarity in their working conditions within the system as it stands.

Investment in research in Ireland continues to fall behind that of our EU counterparts. The government must ensure that the current Research is supported to continue but must also be ambitious in funding the future of Research in Ireland.

Investing in research also requires investing in people. Currently, the average PhD receives €3,458 less than the National Minimum Wage per year. The challenges presented by receiving the average stipend of €16,416 were clear prior to COVID-19 and it is worth noting that a stipend is not an option for all. However, in light of the additional challenges presented by COVID-19, it is imperative that this is increased immediately to ensure postgraduate stipends that are at least equivalent to the living

wage for all postgraduate researchers or collectively bargained Institutional rate for all work undertaken in addition to coursework.

As a sector, we rely heavily on postgraduates to teach while completing their research. It is vital that postgraduate researchers who contribute to teaching are paid fairly for the time they devote to teaching, including recognition of preparation hours.

The closure of many campuses in line with public health advice lead to many postgraduates being prevented from continuing with their research. Those whose research has been interrupted by COVID-19 should have access to their stipends until their research has concluded even if this is beyond the originally agreed date.

Additionally, it is worth noting that measures introduced to slow down or prevent the spread of COVID-19 have had a significant effect on those working from home - especially with the closure of childcare facilities and the new juggles of work, study, and family commitments. We are aware of reports of female researchers specifically who may be under extreme pressures to undertake the majority of caring responsibilities at home. These reports would suggest a need for further investigation in this area to ensure that gender disparity does not create additional pressures for those accommodating additional pressures during this time.

10. Conclusions

All sections of society have faced significant challenges as a result of COVID-19 and as Ireland moves out of lockdown, it's important that all voices are afforded a role in building the 'new normal'. Some economists predict that we are entering the worst economic decline in our history, and should that be the case, education will be essential in ensuring that we are equipped to build a strong economy, and a strong society.

As higher education providers prepare to welcome new and returning students in the autumn, they must be given access to a range of academic and non-academic supports, and offered opportunities to connect with staff and one another. Funding must be in place to support all sections of the community in accessing education and there must be a recognition of the financial challenges that many students and workers are under. If these supports are not made available the reasonable fear is that many students will not be in a position to start or return to education in the new academic year.

Unfortunately, if funding for the sector is not made available to enhance online learning, provide secure employment for staff, support innovative research and break the barriers of accessing education for students, the future is bleak.

USI would welcome the opportunity to meet with members of the Oireachtas committee to discuss the issues outlined in this submission, and further issues affecting our members. If you wish to discuss this submission further, you can contact Lorna Fitzpatrick (president@usi.ie) or Kevin McStravock (education@usi.ie).