

“ Education is the pathway to combating inequality in our society but the reality is that our higher education system is “unfair and unequal” and young people “from less affluent backgrounds are destined to struggle.” ”

Report on Inequality & Disadvantage and Barriers to Education
Joint Committee on Education & Skills, May 2019

Student priorities for the new Government Tosaíochtaí na Mac Léinn don Rialtas nua

July 2020



Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

A chara,

The formation of a new Government and a specific Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science is an opportunity to address the issues that students and our sector are facing.

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 support students.



This document outlines various USI positions and areas of concern relevant to students that can be tackled by this Government. Higher Education was under severe financial pressure before the pandemic took hold but now the system is at breaking point. Student supports must be protected and enhanced.

Some economists are saying we are entering into the worst economic decline in our history. If that is to be the case, education will be key in ensuring that we reskill and retrain, and build a strong economy for our country.

We do not have time to do further research, our sector, our society and most importantly, our students need support. This support requires investment. Funding for the sector must be made available immediately to ensure access to high quality online learning, provide secure employment for staff and break the barriers of accessing education for students. If this is not the priority for the new Department, the future is bleak.

There are solutions, USI have outlined many of those solutions below. USI is willing to work with Government, the Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and with Minister Harris to implement these solutions along with other key stakeholders such as staff representatives and college representative bodies.

We have the chance to support students and the education system, let us not waste that opportunity.

Lorna Fitzpatrick
USI President
1/7/2020

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Higher Education Funding Maoiniú Ardoideachais

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 is predicting a €500 million shortfall this year and next.

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 play in economic recovery and re-skilling coming out of a financial recession.

As Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) 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 - particularly 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. 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.

A key element of additional and sustainable funding for higher education is providing for additional investment in research. Investing in growing research opportunities, which will play a vital role in enhancing Ireland's knowledge economy. In light of COVID-19, the need to ensure adequate funding is now even more important. The funding provided to research in Ireland by the state continuously lags behind that of our EU counterparts.

Over the past few years, a number of vital frameworks have been developed by Government such as the Framework for Consent in Higher Education Institutions and the Framework For Response To The Use Of Illicit Substances Within Higher Education. These framework set out key aims for HEI's to ensure safe and supportive college campuses that will enhance the overall student experience. The actions HEI's need to take to ensure the vision set out within the framework can be realised require investment to embed them within each HEI.

HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING FACTS

- The Parliamentary Budgeting Office estimates that funding per undergraduate student enrolled in 2019 in HEA funded institutions was 50% less than in 2008. That was pre-COVID and with a further increase in student numbers predicted, the next Government must immediately take steps to fund the future of higher education.
- Ireland has one of the lowest levels of expenditure on tertiary education as a percentage of GDP in the OECD area, with most recent figures sitting at 0.6% against an OECD average of 1.5%. (Education At A Glance 2019, OECD)

BUDGETARY ASK: USI IS CALLING FOR: USI repeats its 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.

- Immediate investment in Higher Education to ensure a high-quality student experience in the short-term accompanied by conversations on a long-term funding solution for Higher Education must be prioritised.
- Funding for the implementation of national frameworks that support students and the overall student experience to be provided to Institutions.

Student Fees Táillí Mic Léinn

Student Contribution Charge | Táille Ranníocaíochta an Mhic Léinn

As of February 2020, Ireland charges the highest Higher Education fees in the EU, currently standing at €3,000.

This is in stark contrast to the picture across EU member states, most of whom charge much lower fees, with many charging no fees whatsoever. Despite priding itself on providing a world-class educational experience to its students, Ireland continues to place barriers in the way of students being able to avail of this experience. If Ireland wishes to continue to be seen as a world leader in Higher Education, it must take action to ensure all students have the opportunity to access Higher Education.

A phased reduction to the student contribution charge is a proactive way to help meet the goal of increasing participation as outlined in the National Access Plan.

STUDENT FEES FACTS

The Student Contribution Charge remains the second-highest cost for students and their families after accommodation costs, for those living away from home. For those who live from home, it is the highest expense. (TU Dublin Cost of Living Guide)

- Across the EU, 11 member states charge no fees to Home and EU students for most or all of their courses. (Study.EU)
- Higher Education is a public good and should be viewed as an investment into the future.
- Most recent figures from the OECD show the public return on investment in tertiary education per person in Ireland to be around 17% for men and 12% for women, against the respective OECD averages of 9% and 7%.

BUDGETARY ASK

- An immediate reduction of €500 in the Student Contribution Charge with a cost of €39.3 million. This reduction should form part of a longer term plan to incrementally reduce the student contribution charge and replace it with fully publicly funded investment.

Free Fees Initiative Reform | Athchóiriú ar Thíosnamh na dTáillí Saoire

Removal of residency criteria | Baint na gcritéir cónaitheachta

The residency criteria for the free fees initiatives excludes many people from accessing lower rates of fees to study in Ireland and access to grants. Anyone who hasn't been resident in the country for three out of the past five years is denied access to the free fees initiative and subsequent grant supports, such as Irish citizens who have returned to Ireland after a period abroad.

FREE FEES FACTS

- The free fees initiative states that for level 8 degrees 'Tuition fees may be paid in respect of the full-time students who have been ordinarily resident in an EU/EEA/Swiss State for at least three of the five years preceding their entry to their third-level course and who meet the criteria of the scheme.' (HEA Website)
- If someone is not eligible for the free fees initiative, they could be liable for paying anywhere between €2,000-€6,000 in tuition fees, as well as the €3,000 student contribution charge.
- Asylum seekers and refugees are often classed as non-EU students because of this criterion, meaning that they are charged the EU rate of fees, which usually starts at around €6,000 a year. This also means asylum seekers are denied access to SUSI. While there is a pilot support scheme to provide financial assistance to asylum seekers, only 5 students qualified for that scheme in 2019/20

BUDGETARY ASK

- The elimination of the residency criteria on the free fees initiative

Apprenticeship Fees | Táillí Printíseachta

The Government's action plan to expand Apprenticeship & Traineeship in Ireland 2016-2020 highlighted the Government's commitment to increasing the number of students completing apprenticeship programmes.

However, as highlighted in the 'Review of Pathways to Participation in Apprenticeships', financial issues are a major issue for apprenticeship students with many finding that they are dependent on their apprenticeship salary. Therefore, reversing the decision of Budget 2014 to introduce the pro-rata student contribution and reinstate the state contribution to support apprenticeship students would help to support this group.

Apprenticeship students can pay up to €4,500 in student contribution fees during their time of study. Both employers and education and training providers outlined that apprentices are heavily reliant on their apprentice salary and experience particular financial challenges when they were required to live away from home while doing some of their on-the-job training.

Recognising the severe lack of female apprenticeships, highlights the need for a new approach to supporting and encouraging female participation in apprenticeship courses. There is a need to introduce a similar incentive to the PATH programme for apprenticeships outside of the grant scheme for female apprenticeships to increase female participation in apprenticeships.

BUDGETARY ASKS

- Overturn the decision from Budget 2014 to introduce the pro-rata student contribution and reinstate the state contribution at a cost of €4.8 million.
- Additional PATH programme for apprenticeships to increase female participation in apprenticeships.

Integrated Masters & Graduate Entry Programmes

Máistreachtaí Comhtháite agus Cláir Iontrála do Chéimithe

Pharmacists and Doctors have been just some of the key healthcare professionals engaged on the frontline in Ireland's national response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, whilst everybody can recognize the integral role that they have played in the aftermath of COVID-19, the same sense of recognition is not felt by all students in training for these vital professions due to the fees they are charged, ranging from €7,500 to just under €17,000 per annum. The Government must act to remove the financial barrier faced by student Pharmacists and Graduate Entry Doctors if these essential career pathways are to be made available to everybody, and if the Government is to successfully deliver upon the health workforce aims set out within the 'Working Together for Health' Framework.

INTEGRATED MASTERS - PHARMACY

Changes that were made to the education and training of pharmacists in August 2014 resulted in the restructuring of the previous four-year-Bachelor's degree followed by a one-year Internship to a five-year Integrated Masters Degree. This means that students in the fifth year of the programme are required to pay between €7,500 and €8,500. This fee cannot be covered under the Free Fees initiative and the majority of students cannot avail of SUSI Maintenance support for the fifth year of the programme.

- The most recent figures available on the number of Pharmacy Students in Ireland show that there are 910 students studying across the three accredited programmes, offered by RCSI, UCC and Trinity College Dublin
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- The Irish Pharmaceutical Students' Association (IPSA) conducted a survey of its members in January 2020 which found that over 65% of students were unaware of the Masters Fee before enrolling on the programme, and that 87% reported feeling under 'financial pressure' as a result of the fifth year fee.

GRADUATE ENTRY - MEDICINE

Graduate Entry Medicine is provided across four institutions currently: RCSI, UCD, UCC and UL. The Graduate Entry route accounts for around 1/3 of EU students graduating from medicine. As it is a graduate entry programme, students are required to hold a Level 8 qualification to enter - as a result of this they are subsequently ineligible for Free Fees and SUSI as they have already undertaken a Level 8 degree. Fees for the 2020/21 academic year on the Graduate Entry programme range from €14,580 to €16,970 per year.

- In the absence of other financial support, many students opt to take out loans of up to €60,000 to help them to cover living and tuition costs. This loan is offered at an APR of 6.5% for the duration of the course, at which point the bank's standard capital and interest repayments commence for the 10-year repayment period This leaves many student doctors struggling to keep up with the monthly repayments.

BUDGETARY ASK

- The Government to revise the criteria for the Free Fees initiative to include Integrated Masters and Graduate Entry programmes. The Department of Education & Skills were unable to provide exact costings for the inclusion of Integrated Pharmacy and Graduate Entry Medicine programmes within the Free Fees Criteria.

Student Supports Tacaíochtaí do Mhic Léinn

SUSI Grant | Deontas SUSI

USI has been calling for a review of the SUSI grant system for a number of years. It is important that this review is undertaken within 6 months of the lifetime of the new Government.

There are a number of issues surrounding eligibility criteria for students wishing to apply for a SUSI grant in order to access higher education in Ireland:

SUSI FACTS

- In the current SUSI system, students who are legal adults (18+ years) and support themselves through college with no financial assistance from their parents, cannot be assessed as independent adults, unless they are mature students or have proof of estrangement which can be very difficult to obtain.
- Many students are denied SUSI as their rented accommodation is not registered with the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB). This negatively affects many students living in digs-style accommodation.
- Students applying as an 'independent' must provide proof of address in the form of a bill or letter from the RTB proving their residency. Students living in digs accommodation or subletting a room may not be the position to provide such evidence.
- The SUSI Grant application system, only takes a household's gross income into account, and does not consider the various costs for the household for example, mortgage and loan payments, bills, other family members in the household.
- Part-Time students and students enrolled on fully online programmes are not considered eligible for SUSI.
- The intended purpose of the non-adjacent rate is to provide additional support to those students who may need to commute to college. The change from 24km to 45km has created difficulty for students who are already living far away from college and who are struggling with the high cost of college.

BUDGETARY ASKS

- **Adjacency rates:** USI calls on the Government to reverse the decision taken in Budget 2011 and decrease the qualifying criteria for the non-adjacent rate of the grant from 45km to 24km. The cost of this restoration will amount to €26 million.
- **Thresholds:** Thresholds should be reviewed to ensure they are fair in terms of current wage levels. USI believes the introduction of the living wage is necessary to ensure people have income that meets their cost of living.
- **Level of awards:** The level of awards has not increased since 2012. The current level of awards do not cover the cost of living and should be increased to ensure students are financially supported throughout their education.
- **The cost of increasing the level of award by 10% is €16.4 million.**
- **The cost of restoring the postgraduate grant to pre-2012 levels will cost €40 million**

SUSI Grants, continued

Qualifying criteria: USI made a submission to the Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills in 2019 outlining the key details of the qualifying criteria that need to be reviewed. Some of the key points include:

- Changes to procedures for proof of independent status, recognising that many students cannot provide the evidence required from SUSI
- An urgent review of procedures for proof of residency, to allow students to provide other forms of evidence in order to allow earlier access to grant.
- That refugees and those living in direct provision should be omitted from the residency criteria
- The SUSI grant system must be expanded to include part-time students and placements.
- Those enrolled on fully online courses currently do not have access to SUSI due to the interpretation of the phrase 'requires attendance' in the Student Support Act 2011. Given the current mode of delivery of all programmes, this only serves to highlight the unfairness of this particular rule.

Postgraduate Supports | *Tacaíochtaí d'Iarchéimithe*

The disparity between PGR funding sources differs dramatically depending on area of study, eligibility status, supplementary income, awards or scholarships, Government stipends, industry sponsorship or institutional bursaries. In fact, 50% of Post Graduate Research students report being entirely self-funded altogether.

This is due to many factors, particularly the competitive nature of stipend awarding or eligibility, as can be said of most other supplementary research award incomes. A stipend award is one option of several variable postgraduate research incomes, but is by no means an accessible option for all.

POSTGRADUATE SUPPORTS FACTS

- The average stipend for a PhD student is €16,416, the average Living Wage is €22,444, the average Minimum Wage is €19,874 - this means that the average PhD receives €3,458 less than the National Minimum Wage per year!
- Postgraduate fees can range anywhere between €4,000 and €9,000 per annum, with some specialised courses costing between €20,000 and €30,000 per year. International postgraduate students can expect to pay anywhere from €9,000 to €30,000 in fees alone.
- There are approximately 10,000 postgraduate researchers studying in Ireland

BUDGETARY ASKS

- Postgraduate Stipends to be increased, ideally in line with the Living Wage, or at the very least to reflect the National Minimum Wage.
- A strategic review of the work Postgraduate Research students are engaged in across all HEI's in order to determine the financial need for income supplements in addition to the stipend award.
- The Government to regulate national stipend equity for PGRs across different HEI's where the areas of study, terms of academic expectancy, validity of degree and learning outcomes are all identical.

Student Assistance Fund | Ciste Cúnamh do Mhic Léinn

The Student Assistance fund is a crucial support for students who may be struggling financially. The SAF is a fund students may access to help with living costs while in college. Each year, many students just miss out on the threshold for SUSI by marginal amounts and this fund could act as the reason for these students remaining in their education.

STUDENT ASSISTANCE FUND FACTS

A review of the SAF conducted in 2017 found that 'Stakeholders reported that the SAF is valued highly by students and is a support that is relied upon, particularly by those students most in need! It also found that there was an unmet need, as the fund is fully spent every year and in some institutions, SAF funding is exhausted in the first semester.

In a post-pandemic world, many students will have experienced the loss of employment, or may be supported by family members who have lost jobs and will therefore be in worse financial situations. This source of financial assistance will become more vital than ever before.

In 2018, the allocation for SAF was €9.1 million with €1 million of that fund being ring fenced specifically for part time students who are part of the target groups of the National Access Plan. In 2019 a further €1 million was added to the fund and ring fenced for the Postgraduate Masters of Education students.

USI welcomes previously ringfenced amounts of funding but acknowledges that most students who require access to the fund are full-time undergraduates, and that many of these undergraduates are from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore, it is important that the overall fund is increased to support these students.

BUDGETARY ASK

- The Government to increase the Student Assistance Fund by €3 million

Back To Education Allowance | Liúntas chun Filleadh ar an Oideachas

USI welcomes the commitment to review the BTEA in the programme for Government. USI believes that the current rates for BTEA are not adequate in meeting the costs of attending higher education in Ireland and this needs to be addressed. From 2018 to 2019 there was a 19% decrease in the number of students in receipt of the payment.

The BTEA rate is based on the rate of the qualifying payment the person is in receipt of prior to returning to education. USI is very concerned that this rate does not take any of the additional costs of attending higher education into consideration.

BACK TO EDUCATION ALLOWANCE FACTS

- The current qualifying criteria for BTEA are quite strict and act as a barrier to those returning to education. One particular example includes that to qualify for this support, a student must have been getting a qualifying social welfare payment for 9 months (234 paid or credited days of unemployment). This criteria and others can prevent people from returning to education. There are additional activities that can count towards the qualifying criteria but they are unclear. Reforming these criteria and making the process clear and easy to engage with will further support people to enter education.
- Since the 2016/2017 academic year, students who are in receipt of BTEA and work on a part-time basis over the summer period are required to have their income reassessed. Students have expressed concern about the varied process that is undertaken to reassess their situation. USI believes this should be reviewed and simplified.
- Investing in BTEA and easing the restrictions on entry will have a positive long term impact on economic growth and social issues. The most notable cases will be amongst those recently made unemployed from the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, it is important that the overall fund is increased to support these students.

Back to Education Allowance, Continued

BUDGETARY ASK

- An increase of 5% to the BTEA at a cost of €8,925 per student

USI CALLS FOR A REVIEW OF THE BACK TO EDUCATION ALLOWANCE

- The review should look to reform of the qualifying criteria and reassessment criteria based on summer work.
- Any review should also look at the current guidelines 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.
- Creation of a support line for Students' Union Officers to allow them to represent and advocate on behalf of their members.

Student Teacher Payment | *Íocaíocht na nÁbhar Oide*

In recent years, the impact of the teacher supply crisis has been felt across both primary and post primary institutions. While in post primary, the shortage of subject specific areas is resulting in these subjects being taught by unqualified teachers or removed as an option for students. The issue of teacher supply has previously identified in national and international reports such as the 2012 Sahlberg Report.

The majority of student teachers will spend in the region of 20 weeks on school placement over the course of their ITE programme including, in all cases, a compulsory 10 week block placement towards the end of their ITE programme.

The barriers to accessing ITE programmes with particular reference to the financial burden of school placement are highlighted in USI's **Student Teacher Placement report**, where 55% of current placement students and 53% of graduates reported working between 10-20 hours per week, part-time while completing placement hours.

- 42% of student teachers and 31% of graduates considered dropping out due to financial pressures
- 71% of current placement students and 70% of graduates have/had part-time jobs during their placement,
- 54% of current placement students and 43% of graduates contribute between €31-€60 per week on resources and materials.

In January 2019, the Government acknowledged the immense financial impact on student teachers and introduced an additional 1 million ring fenced investment in the Student Assistance Fund (SAF) for students studying the Professional Masters in Education programme. Yet, this ring fenced funding is only for students studying the PME programme and excludes those on concurrent degree programmes.

It is important to note that while on school placement, student teachers are not paid for the work undertaken and in most cases student teachers take over the main provision of teaching. Student teachers are also precluded by their HEI from taking up positions as a substitute teacher whilst undertaking school placement.

BUDGETARY ASK

- €50 million investment to provide payment to student teachers while on placement at 80% of the entry level rate of pay

The Student Experience

Eispéireas na Mac Léinn

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 HEI's recognize the pressures that the online pivot has placed on students and staff alike, and commit to putting in place measures that mitigate against this.

With social distancing due to remain in the medium-term, and perhaps long-term, 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 Higher Education for the entire student body, international students in particular.

THE PIVOT TO BLENDED AND ONLINE LEARNING

- Whilst efforts are ongoing to ensure that blended learning is designed carefully to maximise the student experience, and in line with feedback from students, there's a need to look more holistically at the entire student experience and how normal out of classroom activity e.g. clubs and societies, co-curricular activities etc. can best be facilitated within public health restrictions.
- There is a need to consider how blended learning can meet the needs of student groups for whom on-campus access is essentially. This would be particularly necessary for students on practically-based programmes such as art and design, performing arts and built environment, apprentices, and for disadvantaged student cohorts.
- The digital deficit must be addressed as a priority if blended learning is to become the new reality in Higher Education. Almost a third of students reported difficulties in engaging in online learning due to connectivity issues with 16% reporting issues in access devices. Institutions have attempted to address some of these issues on a local level through laptop lending, and alternative provision of online learning but this should be accompanied through funding assistance for students to purchase devices, and significant improvements in the digital infrastructure, particularly in rural areas.

BUDGETARY ASK

- A fund to be established to purchase devices to support students engage in blended learning. This fund should be provided to institutions to purchase devices for device lending schemes for students who are in need.
- Immediate action on the rollout of the National Broadband Plan.
- Practical support to be provided to institutions in planning for the return to learning in the new academic term.

Accommodation | *Lóistín*

The housing and rental crisis in Ireland is a major issue, one of the demographics heavily impacted by this are students. We believe that the crisis cannot be solved overnight, but with a comprehensive array of investments, decisions, tax reforms, legislative change and long term vision we can ensure that Ireland is put on the right path to fixing its housing market.

The National Student Accommodation strategy set out that by 2019, 7,000 Purpose Built Student Accommodation beds were to be built and a further 21,000 by 2024. Currently, as of Q3 2019, a total of 8,229 beds have been built. These figures suggest that the government is on target to meet its goals, however the over-reliance on the market has led to average rent prices being out of reach of students.

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.

Looking forward, there are numerous issues that need to be addressed in order to ensure a fairer housing market for all, particularly for students.

BUDGETARY ASK

- €85,000 per bed to be provided to Institutions, in line with the Programme for Government, to ensure that more accommodation is built using the cost-rental model. The cost-rental model should strive to ensure rents are not charged at any higher than 25% of Living Wage income.

LEGISLATIVE ASKS

- The introduction of a rent freeze 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.
- Establishment of the deposit protection scheme which was legislated for in 2015. The primary functions of the scheme would be to establish a legal definition of rental deposits; limit rental deposits to the value of one month's rent; and implement a Deposit Protection Scheme, which would see deposits lodged with an independent third party such as the Residential Tenancies Board.

Students as workers | *Mic Léinn mar oibrithe*

Many students work throughout their time in education to assist them with the cost of education. Students played a vital role in the national response to COVID-19 working in healthcare, supermarkets, cleaning, delivering goods.

In spite of this, many find themselves in a precarious situation regarding employment as a result of COVID-19. Many students were placed on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment as a result of losing their part-time job. The recent decision to reduce the payment for part-time workers to €203 per week doesn't take into account the fact that many students work practically full-time hours in their part-time jobs during the summer months.

Students in precarious work situations such as students on zero hours contracts, and working in the gig economy e.g. Deliveroo have faced difficulties in accessing the PUP due to their employment situation.

For students due to graduate this year, they find themselves emerging into the unknown, with 59.8% of students

reporting concerns about their ability to manage financially over the next year in the recent USI COVID-19 survey and almost a fifth (17.94%) of those who feel that their mental health is worse since COVID-19 citing the future as one of the main reasons for the deterioration of their mental health. The uncertainty regarding employment opportunities post COVID-19 highlights the need for additional training and skills development to be made available, particularly for recent graduates.

USI recognises the commitment in the programme for Government to have the Low Pay Commission examine Universal Basic Income which will lead to a pilot programme during the lifetime of this Government. While that is welcomed, USI believes the need to introduce a living wage is of immediate concern and should be introduced while the LPC undertakes its examination.

USI IS CALLING FOR:

- The Government to take summer work hours into consideration to ensure students receive the full payment of €350 COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment
- End zero hours work conditions entirely.
- Enact legislation that protects those involved in bogus self employment (where employers wrongly misclassify workers as self-employed rather than direct employees) e.g Deliveroo.
- Introduce a living wage so that low paid workers are not paid below the poverty line.
- Introduce financial supports for newly graduated students entering the workforce in the context of the COVID-19 economic fallout to enable graduates to engage in additional training and skills development

Direct Provision | An Soláthar Díreach

USI very much welcomes the commitment to end Direct Provision in the Programme for Government.

The system of Direct Provision has long been an issue for USI. The Programme for Government also committed to the State further increasing the supports for people in direct provision to access third- level education.

Students in Direct Provision receive very little financial assistance from the state but several institutions provide scholarships. HEI's will be under increasing financial pressure post pandemic and USI is concerned that certain initiatives currently being undertaken by HEI's will face funding cuts. Several sanctuary scholars have been issued with deportation orders since they started studying. Students and staff have supported these students during those periods but it should never be a situation any students is facing.

USI IS CALLING FOR:

- Government to ensure that HEIs are adequately resourced to fund sanctuary scholarships.
- Students not to receive deportation orders while they are being supported and funded to study here.

Health & Welfare Sláinte agus Leas

Sexual Health Services & Consent Education

Seirbhís Sláinte Gnéis agus Oideachas ar Thoilliú

USI welcomes the launch of the National Condom Distribution Service (NCDS) in third level settings, which enables the provision of free condoms and sexual health information to students on campuses nationwide.

However, STI's are on the rise and students are a high risk group so further investment into STI clinics, alternative forms of contraception and consent education is critical. This is why the government needs to invest into the student health centres on campus.

USI also welcomes the launch of the Consent Framework for Irish HEI's to ensure the creation of an institutional campus culture which is safe, respectful and supportive for students (DES, 2019), however HEI's need further funding to support the initiatives laid out in the framework. The need for this funding is clear from the Sexual Experience Survey which was launched in June of 2020.

PROGRESS, WITH MORE TO DO

The lifetime ban on gay men donating blood to the Irish Blood Transfusion Service (IBTS) was lifted in January 2017 and replaced with a 12-month abstinence deferral period which means that a man who last had sex with another man more than 12 months ago is now able to donate blood if he meets the other blood donor selection criteria. The IBTS has set strict guidelines for those who are eligible to donate to ensure that all donations are safe to use and to protect donors and recipients. And so, eligibility decided on sexuality is extremely discriminatory and no one should be denied the right to donate blood based on their sexuality.

USI welcomed the availability of PrEP (Pre Exposure Prophylaxis) in Ireland. However, USI is concerned that the availability of PrEP is limited. Expanding the availability of PrEP is one important step to helping reduce the spread of HIV while also raising awareness of the importance of still using protection even while on PrEP.

BUDGETARY ASKS

- €600,000 for consent framework initiatives
- Investment to ensure there is a public health nurse per 1,000 students in every HEI at a cost of €11m.

USI IS CALLING FOR:

- Abolish the 12 month deferral period for MSM to donate blood.
- Increase the accessibility of the PrEP drug.

Mental Health | Meabhairshláinte

As evidenced in our USI Mental Health report findings, student mental health is suffering and the demand from professional help such as the student counselling services is high.

The government needs to invest in student mental health and wellbeing as research shows that supporting student mental health can improve academic performance, retention, and graduation rates. Students with mental health problems were twice as likely to leave higher education without graduating.(Lipson, et al. 2019).

STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

Student counselling services are in high demand but with few staff to meet these demands. In the year 2018/19 almost 14,000 students which is 6.3% (of the student population) accessed the student Counseling Services (PCHEI).

There is also a need for more preventative initiatives such as peer support programmes, education and training for all staff and students.

COVID-19 has had an immense impact on the lives of students with many experiencing financial stress due loss of employment, bereavements, exam stress, isolation, changes to coping mechanisms and support services that would have previously been in place. As a result, many of these students will require additional support with their mental health which will therefore put additional pressure on an already high-demanding counselling service.

USI strongly believes there is a need for a sustainable whole system approach for students' mental health in higher education. USI and our members believe that more support and investment is needed in:

- Peer support programmes
- Mental health nurses in student health centres
- Mental health modules as part of students' curriculum
- Training for both staff and students around mental health, noticing the signs of distressed students and how best to intervene

USI believes that if a whole system approach is adopted into the future there will be additional positive outcomes for student mental health and higher education institutions. Student mental health needs to be a priority for all areas of each Institution, the responsibility must not fall to the student counselling services alone. So we would like to see sustained future funding allocated to these areas.

BUDGETARY ASKS

- Additional investment of €17.5 million which will fund a counsellor/psychologist per every 1,000 students in each Institution
- €2 million invested into a peer support programme in every HEI (€100,000 per HEI)
- Students are reliant on 24/7 crisis services, especially in rural Ireland, so these services need to continue to be funded. Especially now that students will be taking part in online / blended learning and will therefore have less access to onsite student support services.
- Adapting to a whole system approach as outlined above

Student Health Centres | Ionadaithe Sláinte na Mac Léinn

Higher Education Institutions can be key players in the early prevention and treatment of any health issues.

The capability of HEI's to support student health and wellbeing is crucial for students' health, as well as their social and educational wellbeing. This will have a further impact on communities and on wider Society. This is why the government needs to invest into the student health centres on campus.

A lot of students move away from home for the academic year and do not have easy access to their regular General Practitioner (GP), so this is a vital service for many students throughout the year.

STUDENT HEALTH CENTRES ARE A VITAL RESOURCE

"The Irish Student Health Association continues to strive to support its members in offering a high quality service to students and to deliver the same in a timely manner. The current pandemic has highlighted the importance of physical and mental health for all, including students. More resources are continuously needed to meet growing demand and expectations and achieve best outcomes. The Irish Student Health Association strongly requests more resources i.e. staff to be allocated to our student health services."

Dr. Aoife O'Sullivan, President, Irish Student Health Association

BUDGETARY ASK: USI IS CALLING FOR:

- Investment of €31 million to ensure there is one GP and public health nurse per 1,000 students

Irish Language Funding Maoiniú don Ghaeilge

The COVID-19 pandemic has put a huge financial strain on the country and with that brings concerns around an imminent economic downturn. We are concerned that, should cutbacks need to be made, funding for the Irish Language and investment in Gaeltacht areas will be cut significantly as was the case during the last recession.

We welcome the financial support that is due to be provided to those living in Gaeltacht areas and those in financial difficulty due to the loss of income as a result of the cancellation of Gaeltacht courses during the summer. The impact of this cancellation not only affects the Gaeltacht colleges themselves but has a severe knock-on effect for the hospitality and tourism industry in these areas.

USI IS CALLING FOR:

- The decision to reinstate the Gaeltacht grant at a cost of €2m per annum to remain in place and for further funding to support student teachers e.g. paid placement, higher SUSI grants to cover cost of placement.
- Funding provided to HEIs by the Department of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht to run specialised Irish language courses to be protected from cuts. The government must ensure students in these courses continue to have access to quality education and that vacancies in areas such as translation, interpreting and legal studies through Irish are filled.
- Students who rely on employment in the Gaeltacht to save for college must be supported throughout the academic year to compensate for the loss of income.

Environment Timpeallacht

Public Transport | Iompar Poiblí

In order to shift our over reliance on private and individual modes of transport, government investment needs to shift from the construction of roads and into public transport. We need to exponentially expand our bus fleets in urban areas, build high speed rail and metro tracks across the island and divert funding from road projects into public transport infrastructure. Public Transport should be a public good, there to serve the needs of society and the economy on a round the clock basis.

The use of public transport should be easily available and affordable to all. Students and young people currently can not avail of adequate transport links across the country.

A new public transport strategy with the provision of free use for all students would be a major driver of economic growth and assist us in our ambitions to cut our carbon footprint. It would also act as a great tool to connect our communities, re-vitalize economic activity in rural areas, ease congestion, improve productivity and ease the housing demand pressure on urban areas by linking rural and suburban areas to towns, cities and institutions.

USI IS CALLING FOR:

- The expansion of bus and rail services in rural and urban areas to end the reliance on cars in commuter belts and rural areas.
- The expansion of and connection of urban transport modes such as DART, LUAS and BUS systems.
- The introduction of free public transport for students OAPs, those under 18 and those with a disability.

Deposit and Return Scheme | Scéim Earláise agus Aisíoca

USI is calling for the introduction of a deposit and return scheme as committed to in the Programme for Government. USI believes each HEI should be provided with a machine to allow students to use these machines, help our environment and receive a small incentive for doing so. Any such scheme should ensure it is suitable for paper, plastic and glass.

DRS are one of the most efficient instruments to tackle plastic leakage into the oceans and the environment. DRS can reduce drink containers in the ocean by up to 40% according to ZeroWaste Europe. Research conducted by a UK parliamentary Environmental Audit Committee found countries with deposit return schemes tended to recycle between 80% and 95% of their plastic bottles

BUDGETARY ASK

- Government to provide funding to each HEI to purchase a DRS machine which will cost €40,000 per machine.
- Wider society DRS to be introduced across the country

The basic principle on which the students in Ireland build their Union is for the defense, promotion and organisation of the fundamental educational, welfare, economic, political, social, cultural and other interests of all the students in Ireland on a national and international level.

Article 3, Bunreacht Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn,
21 June 1959



Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

MMXX