



Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

Looking Forward
USI Perspectives on Semester 1 HE Delivery

USI have put together this document to outline our perspective on the key issues associated with the delivery of Higher Education for the remainder of Semester 1 in the 2020/21 academic year, in recognition of the ongoing challenges posed by COVID-19. The issues, and solutions raised in this document are based on consultation with USI's Member Organisations. In proposing some of the solutions below, USI has also consulted [the recent statement of the Independent SAGE group in the UK](#) in reaction to COVID-19 breakouts in UK Higher Education.

Executive Summary:

Teaching and Learning

- **Teaching & Learning should be moved online by default, with essential in person teaching continuing to be delivered on campus.**
- **Campuses to remain open for students with essential services such as libraries and student health centres remaining operational.**
- **Spaces to be designated on all campuses for students to access study, to join synchronous lectures and to access food and drink.**
- **Robust measures in place at both an institutional and national level to monitor and maintain the standards of teaching & learning**
- **Consideration of the needs of students on placement, particularly those in professionally accredited courses to be considered, in close consultation with professional bodies and Students' Unions**
- **Students who withdraw this year as a result of COVID-19 to be exempt from existing rules regarding SUSI and the Free Fees Initiative if reapplying for a course within the next five years.**

Accommodation

- **Students to be offered refunds/contract releases as appropriate without financial penalty should they wish to leave term-time accommodation.**
- **Government to lobby private sector providers to ensure contract releases and rent refunds are offered to students renting privately.**
- **Safe and effective protocols to be put in place to deal with COVID-19 cases in student accommodation, and practical supports to be offered to students self-isolating in accommodation.**

Support and Experience

- **All HEIs commit to establishing student experience committees focused on monitoring and enhancing the wider student experience – encompassing essential student-facing services and significant student representation.**
- **HEIs, supported by Government to ensure the provision of generous supports including peer support schemes, online events and wellbeing check-ins.**
- **Students' Unions and clubs & societies to be supported by their HEIs in delivering activities and supports to connect students with one another.**

USI recognizes the significant challenges that COVID-19 has posed for the Irish Higher Education sector to date. The recent decision to move all HEIs into Level 3 measures and mandate the use of online delivery wherever possible was made in response to public health guidance, and USI recognizes the importance of being led by the expert advice in this respect. That being said, the timing of announcements regarding the delivery of Higher Education must be carefully considered so as to ensure that all stakeholders, particularly students, are afforded adequate time to make any necessary arrangements as a result of these announcements.

USI would advocate for a decision to be made regarding the delivery of HE for the remainder of this semester (i.e. until Christmas break) sooner rather than later. Interim decision-making resulting in temporary two to three-week measures offers no reassurance to students or staff, and puts the HE sector in a position of having to be reactive, rather than proactive. In order to provide maximum reassurance to all stakeholders, but particularly to students, USI would recommend that several measures be put in place, the detail of which is provided below.

Teaching & Learning

The current public health situation causes great uncertainty for all sectors, and Higher Education is no different. Students have already experienced significant upheaval from the transition distance learning in March to the challenges posed by the Leaving Cert, not to mention recent changes to the delivery of Higher Education just days before thousands of students were due to return. Even if HEIs are to move out of Stage 3 measures in the coming weeks, it is likely that regional lockdowns will continue to be implemented as necessary, which is likely to cause confusion for students studying in, or living in a county under lockdown. This has the potential to lead to a disparity in the learning experience amongst students.

USI proposes the following measures to be adopted:

- Teaching and learning to be moved online by default, with essential in-person teaching & learning (e.g. laboratory, or practical based subjects) continuing to be delivered on campus. Campuses to remain accessible to anyone who requires in-

person support, including but not limited to NAP target groups and other vulnerable learners.

In proposing the above, USI recognizes the real and genuine concerns that many students have in regard to online delivery of courses. It is essential that the necessary steps are put in place to ensure a high-quality teaching & learning experience for all students, including providing staff with all required resources, and additional support where necessary.

- All campuses to continue to remain open for students who require access. This should be inclusive of essential on-campus services (such as libraries and health centres) and facilities for food and drink. Where commercial and catering services cannot feasibly remain open, catering facilities such as kitchenettes should be available for use by staff and students.

In the event that teaching remains primarily online for the remainder of the semester, it is important that the message created is not that campuses have closed up. Essential on-campus services such as libraries and health centres should remain open for use by students and additional study spaces should be made available where possible for students who do not have appropriate space to study in their living arrangement. These should be open in line with the timetabling of classes, and beyond in order to facilitate independent study. This of course should be carefully managed in line with public health regulations e.g. wearing of masks etc.

- Spaces to be made available on campuses for students who require access to wi-fi, and efforts to be made to create regional connectivity hubs for students in rural areas, with inadequate access to Wi-Fi.

The digital divide is an issue that has been well recognized across the Higher Education sector, however there are insufficient arrangements in place to support students with poor internet connectivity. It is essential that students are supported to engage in online learning, and if campuses are being used less frequently for on-campus teaching, this potentially frees up space for students who require access to Wi-Fi. Attempts should also be made to create regional connectivity hubs in key regional areas. This could potentially be done in collaboration between HEIs, Government and County Councils.

- Sectoral stakeholders to work collectively and cohesively to monitor and maintain the standard of teaching & learning in all courses, particularly in courses that require significant practical teaching. Strong communication should be facilitated between stakeholders in quality assurance, teaching & learning, digital learning, HE management, student representatives and other key stakeholders. This should be mirrored at a national level. Professional Bodies should also be engaged in these conversations on relevant courses.

Safety arrangements should be maintained, and where appropriate, increased in order to ensure the safety of students and staff engaging in essential in-person teaching which cannot be replicated online.

- The needs of students required to undertake placement as part of their course to be carefully considered. Communication between HEIs and Professional Bodies should be ongoing and should be supported at a national level by QQI - student representatives should be part of these conversations. Flexibility should be demonstrated in regard to placement requirements, particularly in the event that students are unable to secure placement, or in the event that students contract COVID-19 whilst on placement.

It's vital that professional bodies, HEIs and student representatives communicate on a regular basis regarding the implications that any change to delivery of HE could potentially have on professional requirements. Where students are required to have completed a certain number of placement hours before graduation, HEIs and professional bodies should aim to be flexible in how students complete these hours should their ability to do so be impacted by COVID-19 e.g. shortage of appropriate placements, students contract COVID-19.

- Students who opt to withdraw from their course this year as a result of the impact of COVID-19 on HE Delivery should not be subject to the same rules regarding SUSI and the Free Fees initiative if reapplying for a course within the next five years.

Given the clear risk that COVID-19 poses for student belonging, it is essential that students who choose to withdraw from their course in the 2020/21 academic year as a result of this should not be penalised financially going forward. We ask that the current criteria for the free fees initiative and SUSI that limits the support available to students who have completed but not finished a course of study in the last five years should be discounted for students in the 2020/21 academic year.

Accommodation

- Offer the students the option of staying in their accommodation, or moving home and facilitate penalty free contract releases, or rent refunds as necessary.

Where provision is being moved online, students should have the option of remaining in their accommodation, or moving home and should not feel pressurized into moving home given that not all students will have a home environment that is conducive to home learning. College-owned accommodation should offer refunds/penalty free contract releases as appropriate and should exercise flexibility should a student's situation change later in the semester.

- The Government to lobby private accommodation providers to demonstrate the same level of flexibility regarding penalty-free contract releases and rent refunds, and if this is not honoured, should ensure that students have access to a refund.

Given the high dependency on the private market for student accommodation, it is vital that students renting privately – be that purpose built student accommodation, private tenancies or digs-style arrangements, be treated no differently to those renting from college-owned accommodation when it comes to refunds and penalty free releases from their contracts. Where private providers are unwilling to honour this request, it is essential that the Government steps in to ensure that no student is left out of pocket.

- Ensure safe, and effective protocols are in place to deal with cases in student accommodation and put in place practical supports (such as food and laundry) to support those required to self-isolate.

USI and its' members have been shocked to see some of the scenes unfolding across the UK in recent weeks where thousands of students have been forced to remain in their accommodation blocks due to outbreaks, with limited supports initially being made available to them. It is essential that Ireland learns from these issues and puts in place robust procedures to safely manage cases in student accommodation. This should be carried out in partnership between college accommodation, private accommodation and the Government.

Support and Experience

- All HEIs commit to establishing (if not currently in existence) a committee focused on monitoring and enhancing the wider student experience. This group should report into any existing institutional COVID-19 committees and should have the ability to review and commission initiatives related to the wider student experience including but not limited to clubs and societies, peer mentoring, retention and wellbeing. The committees should be cross-departmental and should include significant student representation.

Students have faced significant upheaval as a result of COVID-19 over the last six months. This is particularly true of incoming first year students, many of whom have been affected by the disruption to the Leaving Cert and are now entering Higher Education in a totally different manner to any previous cohort. In order to ensure a smooth and comfortable transition, and to address any potential retention issues that may result from primarily online delivery, HEIs should establish committees dedicated to monitoring and enhancing the student experience. This should bring together all relevant student-facing services, and student representatives and the committee should be given the necessary funding and decision-making power to be able to commission new projects and initiatives aimed at supporting the wider student experience in the current environment.

- HEIs, supported by the Government to offer a range of generous supports to students, regardless of whether they're living on/close to campus or learning online. This should include providing practical supports to those living on, or close to campus and ensuring the emotional and social needs of students are adequately met through wellbeing check-ins, online events and peer support schemes.

As per the previous point, initiatives to address the emotional and social needs of students are essential in order to avoid isolation, and to support the transition of new students. This could include further investment in existing peer support and community building activities and studies advisors, as well as developing new initiatives to meet the needs of the current environment.

- Students' Unions, and Clubs & Societies to be supported by HEIs, practically and financially to deliver events and activities aimed at connecting and representing students.

Students' Unions and student-led clubs, societies and networks continually play a pivotal role and supporting students throughout their academic journey – including in the development of a sense of community. This has never been more vital, and thus, SUs and student-led groups should have access to practical and financial supports to enable them to offer these services in the current environment. This might include the use of new, or existing software packages that facilitate online engagement, and practical support in adapting academic representation structures to an online environment.

USI recognizes the significant pressure that all stakeholders in Higher Education have faced as a result of COVID-19, and the significant efforts that have been made to provide a substantial learning experience to students. USI is aware that many students would like as much of an on-campus experience as possible but believes that the safety of students and staff is of the utmost importance as is a consistent approach across all of Higher Education. With this in mind, USI believes that the above measures would help to ensure that students continue to access a high-quality Higher Education experience in an equal manner, whilst also striving to meet the wider social and emotional needs of students.

In order to avoid further disruptions to the student experience, USI believes that it's important that practical and transparent information outlining the approach being taken until Christmas should be provided as soon as possible. USI and its members are committed to working with the Department of Further & Higher Education, and all key stakeholders in Higher Education to ensure that a fair and realistic plan is put in place for the first term.

In addition to all of the above, USI believes that it is important for the Government to commit to addressing the significant financial barriers faced by students in Higher Education. Financial barriers, such as the Student Contribution Charge have been a mainstay of Higher Education in Ireland but awareness of this has been further heightened by COVID-

19 where many students and their families have experienced a sudden loss of income – a commitment to reducing fees, and increasing the financial supports available to students must be demonstrated by this Government in the forthcoming budget.