



REBOOT:

FUNDING IRELAND'S FUTURE
EDUCATION AND BEYOND

Submission to the Government of Ireland on Student Priorities for Budget 2022



Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

Students were struggling long before the global pandemic entered our lives. Financial hardship, mental health difficulties and the inability to meaningful engagement in education are realities too many students are experiencing. These challenges have been further exacerbated by COVID-19, leaving many students struggling or priced out of a third level education.



Access to education extends far beyond the point of entry, it includes progression, engagement with extracurricular activities, reaching your full potential and being able to avail of crucial support services to help along the way. The lack of core funding from the state into the third-level education system has left the entire sector unstable and unable to sustainably develop for years.

The student contribution charge, coupled with the extortionate cost of rent and cost of living remains the largest barrier to accessing third level education in Ireland today. We need annual, sustainable, core funding to enhance our education system and allow the equitable access to a high- quality education.

COVID-19 may have brought significant challenges, but it has also allowed us to question how we view education in making it more accessible, flexible and accommodating to meet the learner where they are at in their unique learning journey. We have a real opportunity to shape Ireland's future for the better.

The proposals outlined in this document, if implemented in Budget 2022 would have a significant positive impact on student wellbeing and their educational learning experience. USI is looking forward to working with the Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and Minister Harris to implement these solutions along with other key stakeholders to ensure equitable access to education and enhance the student experience. We urge you to support our recommendations and look forward to discussing them further with you.

Education is a right and must never be seen as a privilege. Investment into our education system will have a positive long-term impact on our society for years to come. We must invest into our education and create a better future.

Clare Austick
USI President 2021-2022



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Higher Education Funding | Maoiniú Ardoideachais

Investing in core funding. Cost: €500M per annum

Cost: €500M per annum

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research
Innovation & Science.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the impact of our higher education institutions operating like businesses, relying on private sources of income from international students, student accommodation and commercial activities.

Our institutions should not be in a space where they rely so heavily on private sources of income – the state must fund the system to the levels required to ensure a high quality education system for all students.

The current student staff ratio is **among the highest in the EU** and investment of €147.480M per annum is required to bring Irish higher education institutions in line with international best practice of 15:1.

Moving forward, investment in digitally enhanced learning will support the education system post COVID-19. We need to ensure an accessible, flexible, high quality system where we do not simply return to the methods of September 2019, but invest in a new approach that supports students and staff to engage in higher education

in a digitally enhanced system.

It is acknowledged that an increase in student numbers in the future will continue to place pressure on a system that has been continuously underfunded.

Minister Harris is due to announce a sustainable funding model for higher education shortly. The USI urges the Minister to recognise the value and benefit of introducing publicly funded education, by taking the direct steps toward adopting this system – beginning with an immediate reduction in the student contribution charge

A key element of additional and sustainable funding for higher education is providing for additional investment in research.

In light of COVID-19, the need to ensure adequate funding is now even more important. State funding provided to research in Ireland continuously lags behind that of our EU counterparts

- The European Universities Association published research outlining the Irish higher education sector as an environment “where universities were confronted with strong student growth while experiencing grave funding cuts.
- While there has been an increase in funding provided to the sector in 2020, we are still below levels of funding in 2008 and below the recommended funding levels as outlined in the Cassells Report.
- Irish Universities funding consists of approximately 50% private funding, which is the highest in the EU and second highest in Europe as a whole.
- According to the OECD, Ireland invests just 0.8% of GDP in tertiary education which is well below the 1.5% OECD average. (Education at a Glance, OECD)



Student Fees | Táillí Mic Léinn

€1,000 reduction in Student Contribution Charge for three years.

Cost: €81.8M - €84.2M per annum

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation & Science.

As of February 2020, **Ireland charges the highest Higher Education fees in the EU**, currently standing at €3,000. Students studying at undergraduate level in Ireland are paying the highest baseline cost across the EU.

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

The National Access Plan by the Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Higher Education Authority has the overall ambition to improve access and participation for students in tertiary education. A phased reduction to the student contribution charge is a proactive way to help meet the goal

Calculated costs of the measure

21/22	€81.8 millions
22/23	€83.2 millions
23/24	€84.2 millions

Free Fees Initiative | Thioscnamh na dTáillí Saoire

Remove residency criteria from Free Fees Initiative

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation & Science.

The residency criteria for the Free Fees Initiative 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 grant supports, such as Irish citizens who have returned to Ireland after a period abroad.

- The Free Fees Initiative rules state 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.



Apprenticeship Fees | Táillí Printíseachta

Investing in core funding

Cost: €5.3M per annum

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research
Innovation & Science.

USI welcomes the focus on developing and increasing participation, supports and awareness of apprenticeship programmes by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science since the formation of the department.

Considerable work has been undertaken to increase the number of apprenticeships available, the variety of apprenticeship programmes offerings and a focus on greater awareness and support for apprenticeship programmes within schools.

- For many apprentices, the Annual Student Contribution (ASC) annually is typically one third of the €3,000 ASC paid by students attending for the full academic year and so amounts to approximately €1,000 per apprentice per period spent in off the job training within a Technological University or Institute of Technology. However, the student contribution for post 2016 apprenticeships varies across programmes with some having to pay up to €3,000 for their Annual Student Contribution (ASC)
- The commitment to increase awareness and supports for employers in supporting persons with a disability is welcomed in order to prevent additional barriers for those accessing apprenticeship programmes.
- Access to financial supports to incorporate Universal Design and Universal Design for Learning within apprenticeship programmes is needed to address the additional needs of apprentices with disabilities.

Costs:

Overturn the decision from Budget 2014 to introduce the pro-rata student contribution and reinstate the state contribution at a cost of €5.3M per annum.

With the removal of the pro-rata student contribution and the apprentice paying examination fees only, the cost to the State is estimated at an average €267 per apprentice per annum. Based on a current population of almost 20,000 registered apprentices, the estimated cost is €5.3M per annum.

Non-budgetary asks:

Double the apprentice bursary/support scheme outlined within the Apprenticeship Action Plan, which is to be established to fund up to 200 apprentices per year who are experiencing severe socioeconomic disadvantage and who are from target groups, including lone parents, people with disabilities, Travellers and Roma.

Increase financial supports to ensure employers have the tools available to address the additional needs of apprentices with disabilities to prevent any barriers to accessing apprenticeship programmes for people with disabilities.



Integrated Masters & Graduate Entry Programmes Máistreachtaí Comhtháite agus Cláir Iontrála do Chéimithe

Pharmacy & Medicine

Cost: €9.5M per annum

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation & Science

The tireless effort of healthcare workers has been essential to the public health response to COVID-19 over the last fifteen months.

Students across a range of healthcare disciplines have been at the heart of the frontline throughout the pandemic, something which has been acknowledged by society and government alike.

Despite this, many students do not feel valued, particularly when it comes to progressing with their studies. Two cohorts who face specific

financial barriers regarding fees and grant eligibility are Pharmacy and Graduate Entry Medicine students.

If the Government is serious about the commitments made under the 'Our Shared Future' Programme for Government in relation to improving the availability of health professionals, it is vital that the financial barriers for Graduate Entry Medicine and Integrated Masters in Pharmacy students are addressed.

Integrated Pharmacy Masters

- Changes that were made to the education and training of pharmacists in August 2014 by the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland (PSI) 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. (Source 4)
- This means that students in the fifth year of the programme are required to pay a Masters Fee which is set by their institution. This currently ranges between €7,500 and just under €11,000. Students are not eligible for Free Fees funding for the fifth year of the programme as this is a Masters year, and also means they are subject to the much more strict eligibility criteria for postgraduate funding under SUSI.
- Students on the Integrated Masters programmes in Queens University Belfast and Ulster University, and across the UK pay the same fee across all four years of the programme, including the Masters Year (Year 4). (Sources 4a and 4b)

Graduate Entry Medicine

- One of the recommendations of the Fottrell Report in 2006 was the establishment of a new Graduate Entry Medicine programme. This is currently delivered across four colleges: RCSI, UCC, UL and UCD.
- Students on Graduate Entry Medicine programmes do so as a second degree and are therefore ineligible for Free Fees or SUSI.
- Fees for EU students currently range from just under €15,000 to just under €17,000 per year. Graduate Entry Medicine is a four year programme.
- The only financial package available to Graduate Entry Medicine students is a loan offered by a commercial bank. Students can borrow up to €60,000 over four years, capped at €15,000 per year meaning that students in three of the colleges would be required to make up the shortfall. (Source 5)

Costs

As the Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science 'currently has no plans to provide free fees funding for second degree courses or postgraduate years', they unfortunately could not provide an estimate cost for this.

If the current state contribution of €11,524 for Graduate Entry Medicine fees was increased by €10,000 per student, this would cost c. €9.5M per year. This would bring the contribution by the student to c. €5,000 to €7,000 per year (based on current fees).

Expanding SUSI funding to Graduate Entry Medicine - €3.5M (based on 45% of students receiving an average grant of €4,770)

Non-budgetary asks:

Change the Free Fees criteria to allow students on Graduate Entry and Integrated Masters programmes to access it for the duration of their studies.



Student Supports | Tacaíochtaí do Mhic Léinn

Overview

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation & Science.

USI recognises the ongoing SUSI review and is committed to engaging fully in this process as a member of the Review Group.

USI believes the following recommendations are required to ensure an effective student financial support system.

Overview

- Restore the grant thresholds to their pre-Budget 2011 rates for both undergraduate and postgraduate grants and ensure grant support for both undergraduate and postgraduate students are increased to reflect the rise in the cost of living.
- For the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to restore the grant adjacency rates to the pre-Budget 2011 rate of 24km.
- A rural exemption or decrease in rate for rural colleges with poor transport links.
- Less reliance on 'as the crow flies' as the method employed to determine eligibility.

Eligibility

- Allow for flexibility in certain cases as not every application can fit the criteria as comfortably as others.
- Ensure that anyone over the age of 18 can be eligible to be assessed as 'Independent' if they meet all other criteria. As well as this, ensure that applicants should be able to transition between being classified as a 'Dependent' and an 'Independent' upon production of evidence and allow for a wider range of evidence accepted as proof of independence, with additional flexibility be afforded to applicants trying to prove estrangement.
- Introduce a non-means-tested unpaid placement allowance through SUSI and change the income assessment procedure to calculate eligibility based on net income, not gross income and introduce allowances for household costs e.g. mortgage payments, rent, utilities and abolish the cap on holiday earnings.

Extend SUSI

- Abolish the residency rule to enable access to SUSI for returning emigrants, asylum seekers, migrants, those

who are undocumented and those living in Direct Provision.

- That grant supports should be extended to offer students the same opportunity to apply for financial support regardless of the college they're studying in.
- Extend the Fee Grant to students studying outside of the state.
- Extend the non-adjacent rate to all students on Erasmus+ mobilities who otherwise meet the criteria.

Courses

- That students undertaking courses above Level 6 in FET colleges be eligible for SUSI
- That the same grant supports for full-time students be extended and offered to part-time students who qualify under the other criteria.
- That grant eligibility be extended to students studying fully online courses.
- That the review considers how students undertaking modular/ micro-credential courses can be supported.
- Abolish the progression rule within the SUSI criteria, or at the very least reform this to make an exception for students on Graduate Entry programmes.
- Extend SUSI eligibility to students who have previously commenced but not completed a course, without the five-year rule.
- Extend SUSI eligibility to students repeating a year.

COVID

- Include the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and other COVID-19 specific payments under Income Disregards.



Postgraduate Supports | Tacaíochtaí d'larchéimithe

SUSI Grant | Deontas SUSI

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation & Science.

The disparity between Postgraduate research (PGR) funding sources differs dramatically depending on area of study, eligibility status, supplementary income, awards or scholarships, Government stipends, industry sponsorship or institutional bursaries.

According to the Postgraduate Research Student Survey, 18.7% of Postgraduate Research students

report being entirely self-funded. 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.

Recommendations

- 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 is needed in order to determine ensure Postgraduates are paid fairly for work completed outside of their research, in addition to the stipend award which does not cover the cost of living.
- 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

A crucial support for students

Cost: €3.2 million

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation & Science.

The Student Assistance fund is a crucial support for students who may be struggling financially. The SAF is a fund student may access to help with living costs while in college.

Each year, there are students who miss out on the threshold for SUSI by marginal amounts and the SAF provides many with the means to remain in third level education.

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. The total SAF allocation for 2020/2021 was

€18.2 million which included an additional €8.1M in response to the COVID19 pandemic. We believe this investment should be retained with an additional investment to recognise the large numbers of students have lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19.

The USI condemns the Government's decision to remove the Pandemic Unemployment Payment from students in September, especially when taking into consideration the high numbers of students in receipt of the PUP (which reached 46,906 in March 2021).

In 2019/2020 SAF supported circa 14,000 students in Higher Education.

- During a review of the SAF in 2017, it was outlined that ‘the SAF is valued highly by students and is a support that is relied upon, particularly by those students most in need.’¹
- Research conducted in 2017 on the SAF found that there was often an unmet need with the fund being fully spent every year and in the case of some institutions, the SAF is exhausted in the first semester. This highlights the important role this fund plays in supporting students in third level.
- At present the SAF is not available to International/non-EU fee paying students. Yet it is advised that HEIs ring-fence a small fund from non-EU fee income to provide for any emergency financial requirements arising for these students. USI believe international students, migrants, asylum seekers and those who are undocumented should have access to SAF supports.
- **USI recommends the opening of SAF support to international students, migrants, asylum seekers and those who are undocumented.**

Back to Education Allowance | Liúntas chun Filleadh ar an Oideachas

A crucial support for students

Cost: €3.9M

Department of Social Protection

An initiative overseen by the Department of Social Protection, the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) is an essential source of financial support for those returning to and remaining in Higher Education, particularly mature students and lone parents seeking to further their education.

USI welcomes the commitment outlined in the Programme for Government to review the BTEA

system and would welcome involvement in this process. USI firmly believes that the BTEA is broadly in need review and reform in a number of key areas and would seek to work with the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, in addressing the following areas:

- USI believes that the qualifying criteria to avail of BTEA is too stringent and can be unclear at times. A prime example of this is the students being required to have been receiving a jobseeker’s payment for 9 months. Such a prolonged wait period ahead of applying for BTEA could delay a student from enrolling in a course by a considerable number of months depending on the time of the year in which they became unemployed.
- The academic year 2018/2019 saw a particular fall in BTEA recipients, with a 19% decrease in the number of those availing of BTEA.
- Latest stats for 2020/2021 saw just 7,300 students availing of BTEA while at the same time, PUP numbers for students in need of financial support rose to a staggering 41,000 as of March 2021. In the absence of the pandemic, there are still many students failing to meet the criteria and therefore the government must work towards easing these.
- During the 2016/2017 academic year, students undertaking part time employment, including during the summer period, are reassessed for their BTEA based on the income. With the constant increase in the cost of living the BTEA rates as they stand are not adequate to meet the costs of third level education and therefore many students are forced to take up part time employment.
- As it stands the current rates of BTEA are the same of adults on Jobseekers Benefit which are currently €203 per week. As mentioned, this rate does not meet the additional costs and financial strain experienced by students attending third level education and should be increased significantly to meet the increasing costs of living in Ireland.
- Additionally systems within the Department of Social Welfare should be updated to ensure the efficient roll out of BTEA. Suggestions include training and guidelines for social welfare officers in BTEA, upgrading application for BTEA to a digital format to allow for quicker processing of applications. Establishing direct lines of communication between Students’ Unions and Social Welfare Services to allow greater support for students applying for BTEA.



- An increase of 5% to the BTEA per annum with an increase of €527.80/annum totally €11,083.80 for each BTEA recipient per year.
- USI welcomes the commitment in the Programme for Government to review the Back to Education Allowance, the review should look to reform of the qualifying criteria and reassessment criteria based on summer work.
- For the government to improve upon the qualifying criteria for BTEA, so that it is clearer, more straight forward and less constrained.
- Create a support line for Students' Unions in addition to the query line to allow Students' Unions to advocate for students.
- Total cost to the state (based on 2019/2020 enrolments): €3,852,940
- Introduce training on the Back to Education Allowance for Department of Social Welfare staff to better handle BTEA cases.
- Introduce a data sharing arrangement between SUSI and the Department of Social Protection to ensure there are no overlaps in grants which may result in students having to return payments.

The Student Experience | Eispéireas na Mac Léinn

The Impact of COVID-19

Cost: €27.6M

Department of Social Protection

Higher Education as we know it has been transformed over the last fifteen months as a result of COVID-19. As we plan for the next academic year, it is pivotal that the digital divide that has been created by the move to online learning continues to be addressed through access to electronic devices and support for learners in areas of poor connectivity.

Furthermore, with COVID-19 hugely restricting the manner in which informal engagement could be fostered between learners, student engagement projects developed and delivered in partnership between staff and students should be a core area of focus over the next year. The inequality in the tax implications of the COVID-19 Disruption Grant should also be resolved so that

no students are subject to tax for this one-off payment.

- Over a quarter (25.9%) of students did not have a suitable study environment at home and over half (51.8%) did not feel connected to their higher education institution despite the restricted access to campus. (Source 1).
- Over 5000 laptops purchased through the DFHERIS Device Lending scheme had not been distributed to students as of late February 2021. (Source 2).
- Approximately 17% of students are reported to live in areas of low broadband coverage, according to research carried out in 2020. (Source 3)

Devices & Connectivity

- The device lending scheme was a welcome investment in Summer 2020, and has played a pivotal role in bridging the digital gap for many students, particularly those in National Access Plan target groups.
- However, the lack of consistency in the criteria applied across institutions resulted in some students with genuine need being unable to access devices through the scheme. Where the disparity in the criteria across institutions was obvious, this led to significant frustration for students unable to access a laptop through the scheme.
- Furthermore, the additional administrative burden placed on already busy teams in Access Offices and Support Services within institutions led to delays in the

administration of the scheme.

- This scheme also failed to address the digital divide in full as no provisions were made for students in areas of low broadband coverage, estimated to be around 28,000 students.

COVID Disruption Grant

- Approximately 73,000 students received the €250 payment via SUSI. Around 116,500 students not in receipt of SUSI will receive the payment via their HEIs by the end of the year. (Source 4)
- Whilst those receiving the payment via SUSI will have it considered as a non-taxable income, this will not be the case for those whose payment is made by their HEI. This in effect creates a two-tiered system, meaning that some students will be taxed for the €250 payment they



have received.

- The Department of Further & Higher Education should work with the Department of Finance and the Revenue Commissioners' Office to address this disparity.

Student Engagement

- The lack of on-campus contact time has significantly impacted the student experience with over half of students who completed StudentSurvey.ie slightly or strongly disagreeing that they felt connected with their institution despite the lack of time spent on campus.
- In planning for the new academic year, it is imperative that HEIs place an even greater focus on meaningful student engagement in order to combat the potentially

depleted sense of community, particularly amongst this year's first year student cohort.

- To support this, the Department should allocate a €5 million Student Engagement Projects fund to be distributed across HEIs in line with how the Student Assistance Fund is currently distributed. The fund should be administered by a sectoral agency or organisation and HEIs should be required to put together a joint proposal for how the funding will be used in collaboration with their Students' Union.

Cost:

€20 million for further rollout of the Device Lending Scheme (including €5M for additional administrative costs)

Approximately €7.56 million for the establishment of a non-means tested Connectivity fund for students in areas of low connectivity. (Calculated on basis of the cost of 9 months of an uncapped data package at an average cost of €30 per month x the approximate number of students living in an area of poor broadband coverage)

Non-budgetary asks:

- Implement consistent criteria and application process for Device Lending Scheme
- The Department of Finance and Revenue to address the disparity that exists within the COVID Disruption Grant and taxes payable



Accommodation | Lóistín

Overview

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation & Science.

The Student Accommodation crisis has worsened significantly in the last 3 years. While rents are controlled, they are still too high with the vast majority of new beds coming on stream coming from the private sector. Today, the average rent in these complexes is around €2451 per week, which is far beyond affordable for anyone never mind a student studying full time. There is a clear need for a policy shift where institutions are provided with government grants outside of the EIB to support the construction of publicly owned student beds.

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.

While supply is important and over time will assist in stabilising market prices, the focus on securing student accommodation from private developers has led to the prioritisation of profits and leave students paying very high prices for basic accommodation.

It is currently estimated that the cost of purpose built student accommodation is €115,000 per bed.

- The current average rent in PBSA is €245 per week.
- Student income cannot support rents of these levels with majority of students working part time on minimum wage (20x10.20= €204)
- There is an education inequality in that students are being discouraged from taking up places in courses they wish to pursue because they cant afford to live there.
- EIB Finance is no longer enough to support the construction of student beds (constructions costs are too high)
- Student Accommodation in HEIs is usually less expensive than in private market.

Site Value Tax

- The abolition of the current property tax and replacement with a Site Value Tax would be a far more productive and equitable form of taxation that would generate revenue for the exchequer from our country's main source of wealth, land. The site value tax would generate revenue for the state to assist in paying for a number of these asks, and shift the tax burden from the worker to the source of wealth.
- Currently, the total income tax revenue for 2019 was over €21billion , which is a tax on work, while our total revenue on wealth was €473.4M. It is essential, we adjust our tax system to pay for these investments; a site value tax would be a more proportionate way of doing this than taxing work.

USI is calling on government to provide block grants to HEIs to support the construction of new student accommodation and to introduce a Site Value Tax as a fairer form of taxation in replacement of the existent property tax.



Placements

Implementation of a non-means tested placement bursary of per student for all students enrolled on courses with unpaid mandatory placement elements.

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation & Science.

Practice placement is a fundamental aspect of the learning experience for thousands of students across a range of disciplines. Combining academic learning with hands-on practical skills in a workplace setting enables the students to meet the personal and professional competencies required to practice in their desired profession, and in many cases to satisfy the standards of proficiency required to be added to the professional register after graduation.

However, what is meant to be a positive and integral element of the learning experience can quickly become a source of significant stress for many students due to the inadequate financial supports provided to students required to undertake placement as part of their course.

Across a wide variety of fields of study, there is huge disparity in how students are compensated for time spent on placement with some receiving a salary, some being reimbursed for placement-related travel costs and many receiving no financial support whatsoever.

To compound this issue, placement also serves as a further financial barrier for many students with limited placement locations, and unsociable hours leaving them with long and expensive commutes, or having to pay double-rent. This is particularly true of students in various health professions, but is also faced by student teachers, students in social care settings and many other professions.

- There is nationally held available data on the number of Higher Education students on placement – and no centrally available financial supports available to students on placement with the exception of the Student Assistance Fund which is assessed on a case-by-case basis.
- Due to the variety of professions involved, practice regarding financial remuneration, or other supports varies widely across disciplines. Some students receive a salary as part of their placement – or in some cases only during their final year internship. In other professions, travel expenses are available to students but no other financial supports are made available. Some professions do not regulate pay for placement so practice varies across placement providers.
- Receiving limited or no financial support for placement places huge pressure on students, and results in many holding down almost full-time hours in part-time employment alongside their placement. This not only impacts their ability to devote their attention to their studies and their placement, but negatively impacts their wellbeing.
- Collecting data nationally on how many students undertake placement and what remuneration or financial support, if any they receive would help to build a more comprehensive picture of the pressure faced by students due to placement, and to develop effective policy to address this.
- Students on mandatory unpaid placements should be entitled to a non-means tested bursary per week of placement which can be paid via SUSI.

Non-budgetary asks:

For the Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science or one of its agencies to collate comprehensive data on courses with mandatory placement elements to include information on the amount of placement required, whether students are paid whilst on placement and any financial supports available to students whilst on placement e.g. bursaries, travel and accommodation expenses. This data should be collated and updated on an annual basis.



Direct Provision | An Soláthar Díreach

- Department for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science
- Department for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
- Department for Justice

USI welcomes the publication of the 'White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service' and the commitment within the Programme for Government to "end the Direct Provision system and will replace it with a new International Protection accommodation policy, centred on a not-for-profit Approach".

While the White Paper aims to address barriers faced by many asylum seekers (including access to the labour market, accessing drivers' licenses and reducing processing times for International Protection applications), the White Paper fails to address barriers to accessing Education. USI have long called for access to higher education to be made available to migrants, asylum seekers and those who are undocumented.

- Young children within the current Direct Provision system have access mainstream childcare services and primary and post-primary education, yet access to higher and further education remains inaccessible to many due to being unable qualify for free fees initiatives and lack of access to financial supports.
- Application processing is one of the most significant issues continuously raised with direct provision, with a particular emphasis put on wait times. The average length of stay in Direct Provision is 24 months, but with some residents having spent up to 10 or 12 years living in these conditions. 15.8% of people are spending between 2 to 3 years living in Direct Provision, 13.8% between 3 and 4 years and 4.7% of people between 4 and 5 years and 2.5% of people have been in the system for more than 7 years.
- Protection applicants do not qualify for the Free Fees Initiative nor are not eligible for EU fee rates and with only a small number of grants and private scholarships available they often are expected to pay thousands in fees to access third level education. Protection applicants have access to pre-primary, primary and secondary education yet cannot progress onto third level education and only a small number in conditioned circumstances are allowed to enter the workforce.
- With long wait periods and little access to education and the workforce, increased access to mental health supports are needed in the interim while we eagerly await the new International Protection accommodation policy.
- In the 2019/2020 academic year there were 109 applications to the Student Support Scheme and 40 students were awarded support. The Government needs to increase awareness of this scheme and move to include migrants, asylum seekers and those who are undocumented within the SUSI system.

Non-budgetary asks

- Migrants, asylum seekers and those who are undocumented to be able to access the supports to enter college including HEAR, DARE and SUSI
- Include migrants, asylum seekers and those who are undocumented as a target group within the National Access Plan.
- Allow migrants, asylum seekers and undocumented people pay domestic fees to access Higher and Further education rather than international fees.
- Support access initiatives into higher education for migrants, asylum seekers, those who are undocumented and those within the Direct Provision system.
- Increase awareness of the Students Support Scheme in the shortterm while opening SUSI applications to from migrants, asylum seekers and undocumented backgrounds.
- End deportation orders for students undergoing studies in Ireland.
- Government to ensure that HEIs are adequately resourced to fund sanctuary scholarships.
- Increase mental health supports for those in Direct Provision.



Health & Welfare | Sláinte agus Leas

Sexual Health Services & Consent Education Sláinte Gnéis agus Oideachas ar Thoilliú

Cost: €49.3M-€53.3M (some shared costs with other elements in this submission)

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research
Innovation & Science.

Sexual health is a key component to our overall wellbeing. USI believes students should have access to adequate, accessible and well-resourced sexual healthcare facilities on and off campus. USI welcomes the implementation of the National Condom Distribution Service in 2019/2020 to make condoms available and free of charge for students on campuses. However, other methods of contraception are not easily accessible.

COVID-19 has presented an additional challenge to access sexual healthcare facilities as the majority of clinics are restricted, closed and only open to already registered patients in cases of emergencies. This means that a large cohort of students have not been able to avail of much needed sexual healthcare this year.

STIs are continually on the rise, with students being identified as a high-risk group. USI is calling for further investment in STI clinics, sexual healthcare facilities, free universal accessible methods of contraception and consent education.

USI very much welcomes all the work progressed in the area of consent education and ending sexual violence on campuses this year. HEIs need

to be supported to enable them to fulfill their action plans and creating a zero-tolerance culture to sexual violence and fostering a safe, respectful and inclusive campus environment.

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 and believe in the importance of expanding the availability of PrEP.

- According to the HPSC, the groups at increased risk for acquiring and onward transmission of STIs include young people aged 15–24 years, making students a high risk group
- 29% of females, 10% of males, and 28% of non-binary students reported non-consensual penetration by incapacitation, force or threat of force.
- 29% of students said the perpetrator was a student at their college. Approximately 8% said the assault had taken place on campus.
- Reported that cost was a barrier in choosing their preferred method of contraception.
- Only 3% of the eligible Irish population give blood, providing blood for a population of over 4 million
- 3,000 blood donors are needed each week in Ireland
- One in four people will need a blood transfusion at some point in their lives

Costs

- Investment to ensure there is a public health nurse per 1,000 students in every HEI at a cost of €11M.
- Investment to ensure there is a GP per 1,000 students in every HEI at a cost of €20M.
- Investment to further implement the Consent Framework €0.3M
- Investment in universal accessible free contraception at a cost of €18-22M.



Mental Health | Meabhairshláinte

A fundamental element in the student experience

Cost: €28M (some shared costs with other elements in this submission)

- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation & Science.
- Department of Health

USI believes that positive student mental health and wellbeing is a fundamental element to the overall student experience. Worryingly, student mental health has been worsening over the years, particularly with many students struggling with their mental health as a result of Covid-19.

Professional mental health supports are crucial in supporting students through college. Often on campus student mental health services are under-resourced and underfunded, resulting in long waiting lists. 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).

USI believes there is a need for a whole campus approach to supporting student mental health which involves collaboration between support services and key stakeholders within the institution.

This idea is adopted from the Lancet Model which places a huge emphasis on the need for diverse support services to meet the student where they are at in their mental health journey. The Lancet Model advocates for cross-collaboration between counselling services, disability services, health units, GP's, mental health nurses, psychiatrists, lecturing staff who are trained in mental health awareness and wellbeing coordinators, both on and off campus.

- The mental health budget out of the overall health budget is 6% compared to international standard of 12%
- There were 628 unique text conversations via the 50808 text line from Sept 2020 to May 2021.
- 75% of adults with a mental illness first experience symptoms before the age of 25. The peak onset occurs between 18-25 coinciding with the time spent in college. Students are experiencing extremely severe levels of anxiety (38.4%), depression (29.9%) and stress (17.3%).
- A free on campus counselling service is important to students.
- A third of students at 33.94% feel that their mental health has worsened as a result of COVID-19.
- Just under a quarter of students at 23.67% have been unable to access mental health supports in their college since COVID-19.
- More than 90% reported feeling increasingly lonely, while 93% of students have found it difficult to stay connected with friends.

Costs

- Investment to ensure there is a mental health nurse per 1,000 students in every HEI at a cost of €11M
- Investment to ensure there is a Counsellor/Psychologist per 1,000 students in every HEI at a cost of €17.5M.
- Investment in a peer support programme in each HEI.
- Investment and commitment to a whole campus approach to student mental health services similar to the Lancet Model as outlined above.

Non-Budgetary Asks

- Adoption of the Lancet Model which aims to integrate a whole campus approach to supporting student mental health and wellbeing.
- Commitment to a national peer learning programme roll out.
- Investment into HEIs to support the action priorities of the Student Learner Wellbeing Engagement steering group.



Student Health Centres | Ionadaithe Sláinte na Mac Léinn

An essential part in protecting students' health

Cost: €31M (some shared costs with other elements in this submission)

- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation & Science.
- Department of Health

Student Health Centres are an essential part in protecting and educating the student population. Between the healthcare staff who assess and assist student patients, and the informative campaigns and information they share, these centres can play a vital role in the early prevention and treatment of health issues of students.

Unfortunately, not every student has access to a Student Health Centre in their Higher Education Institution, and for those who do the long waiting lists can be a deterrent in accessing the service.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen how important it is for individuals to have general check-ups to get the necessary medical help one

may need. HEI's supporting student health and wellbeing is not just important for the individual's health, but also for their educational wellbeing and success, and overall social experience.

The government must adequately and appropriately address the gaps in funding and lack of resources currently being experienced in Student Health Centres in Irish HEIs. The government must work to address and financially support Student Health Centres in their provision of resources, but also work with HEIs without Student Health Centres to establish them on their campuses.

- Mental Health appointments would form a growing proportion of these appointments for all, so to create a holistic whole system approach to mental health, there needs to be services outside of the counselling service.
- The cost of appointments in student health centres are significantly less compared to privately owned practices. The cost of health appointments deter many students from prioritising their health.
- Having a health centre on campus minimises the cost of travel, makes it easily accessible and highlights the importance of student health and wellbeing by providing the service in each HEI.

Costs

- Investment to ensure there is a public health nurse per 1,000 students in every HEI at a cost of €11M.
- Investment to ensure there is a GP per 1,000 students in every HEI at a cost of €20M.



Irish Language Funding | Maoiniú don Ghaeilge

Support for the national language, culture and education

Cost: €4.8M

- Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport, Media
- Department of Education and Skills

The Union of Students in Ireland is dedicated to the promotion of the Irish language at third level across the island of Ireland. Funding and legislation is required to ensure that the language can thrive and that generations of young people on the island will have the opportunity to speak it both inside and outside of the education system.

We are calling on the Government to increase opportunities for young people to study through Irish at third level in order to meet future targets for civil service recruitment, as well as to provide adequate funding for student teachers attending mandatory Gaeltacht courses, and to develop a comprehensive policy for Irish in the education system.

- In Budget 2020 Minister for Education and Skills Joe McHugh reinstated the Gaeltacht Grant for student teachers attending mandatory placement in the Gaeltacht. However, this does not currently extend to students in private colleges, despite incurring similar costs as those in State-funded institutions.
- The Government should also move away from the Gaeltacht Grant model of funding the tréimhse foghlama sa Ghaeltacht, and move towards a more sustainable model of funding, removing the implication that students should be responsible for financing a mandatory part of their course themselves.
- The Government will have a target of 20% of newly recruited civil servants being fluent in Irish by 2030. In order to meet these targets, third level institutions need to deliver courses in areas outside of Irish e.g. business, science, law, through Irish to ensure there is a supply of civil servants working in various areas who are competent in Irish in order to reach this target.
- There is a lack of support available for students who went to Irish-medium primary and secondary schools upon reaching third-level. Provisions should be put in place in all HEIs for students to carry out assessments through Irish where the course is not delivered in Irish, and supports should be put in place for students whose first language is Irish and their academic writing in English. This is common practice in HEIs in Wales.
- There has never been a comprehensive policy for how Irish should be taught in schools. USI recognises the fault with how Irish is currently taught and the system of exemptions that currently exists. We support the #Gaeilge4All campaign which calls for an inclusive and comprehensive policy for how Irish is taught from pre-school to third level in order to provide everyone the opportunity to learn the language.

Costs

€2.8M to extend Gaeltacht grant to all student teachers

€2M extra funding for courses through Irish at third-level

Non-Budgetary Asks

Comprehensive Policy for Irish in the Education System from pre-school to third level based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages



Public Transport | Iompar Poiblí

Affordable transport to get more cars off the road

Cost: €328.8M

Department of Transport

USI believes that public transport is a public good that should serve the needs of the public and be easily accessible, available, and affordable to all. The Programme for Government outlines that the Government is committed to a 2:1 ratio of expenditure between new public transport infrastructure and new roads over its

lifetime, and it is imperative that the government properly address the current issues and failings of the public transport system in Ireland in three respects: accessibility, availability, and affordability.

Accessibility

While some aspects of modern public transport have been fitted to suit the needs of those with disabilities, there are still significant short fallings in the accessibility of public transport. The NTA note that there are a significant number of existing areas of the public transport sector which will need retrofitting to meet this need. Further investment should be examined in this area, to better the accessibility of public transport and ensure that public transport services are properly accessible for people with disabilities, including students with disabilities trying to access education.

Availability

The availability of public transport in rural areas has been a significant problem for students from rural communities in having adequate options in commuting to education. The closure of routes and the lack of regular services leaves many students unable to use public transport. Instead, these students rely on private modes of transportation, or have no choice but to get accommodation closer to their institution.

Investing in the expansion of public modes of transport to connect rural communities, would largely take the pressure off the current accommodation crises. It would also be

useful for students who struggle to afford the extortionate costs of accommodation in Ireland. Expansion of public transport in rural areas would also reduce traffic congestion in many areas also.

Affordability

Expansion and improvements to public transport systems must be backed with adequate financial support from the Government for students so they can afford to use public transport. The Government should strongly work to provide heavily subsidised or free public transport for students. Student fares for public transport should be drastically reduced so that the cost of attending 3rd level education is more affordable and reflects the travel costs of other European countries such as Germany where public transport is practically free.

Climate Action

With the recent announcement of the Government's Climate Action Bill 2021, important targets must be met by Ireland in reducing CO2 emissions. Investing more in low emission modes of transport such as electric carriages in cities as well as walkways and bicycle schemes would be significant in meeting these goals as well as reducing harmful emissions to our ecosystems and improving the general health and mental health of the public.

Costs for investment in:

- Bus stations €12.5 M
- Bus Stops, Train Stations €115 M
- Taxi Hackneys €190 M
- The capital cost for a 15 station scheme and appropriate bicycle scheme is 1.3 million

Long-Term and non-budgetary asks

- To make public transport free/more affordable for students in Ireland like it is in other countries around Europe (example: Germany)
- To provide more funding for disability access in public transport in cities and rural areas, primarily outdated transport lacking access
- To provide more funding and prioritisation for public transport, walking and cycling over roads and motorways
- To ensure that students who cannot afford modern cars emitting less CO2 are not taxed unfairly as a result
- To further invest in Public transport for commuter towns and rural areas to bring communities closer together
- To expand cycling schemes to include students for initiatives such as the cycle to work scheme
- To further expand on safe cycle routes to school schemes to further include 3rd level institutions



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