



# The Union of Students in Ireland [USI]

Submission For The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Statement of Strategy for 2023 to 2025.

## About the Union of Students in Ireland

The Union of Students in Ireland (Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn) is the national representative body for third-level Students' Unions in Ireland. Founded in 1959, USI now represents more than 374,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students in Further and Higher Education Colleges across the island of Ireland. USI is a democratic organisation. The supreme authority of the Union is Comdháil (Congress), which is representative of each affiliated students' union. The basic principle on which the Union of Students in Ireland is built is to defend, promote and organise for the fundamental educational, welfare, economic, political, social, cultural, and other interests of all the students in Ireland on a national and international level.

## Contents

<i>About the Union of Students in Ireland</i> .....	1
1. <i>Background- insufficient funding &amp; reputation at stake</i> .....	2
2. <i>Way forward- Ireland must invest more in higher education research</i> .....	3
3. <i>USI Recommendations</i> .....	4
3.1 Funding and Financial Supports .....	4
3.2 Student participation in decision making.....	5
3.3 Access in HE.....	5
3.4 Student Accommodation and commuting .....	6
3.5 Welfare Support .....	6
3.6 Career Development .....	7
3.7 International education and research .....	7
3.8 Postgraduate Researchers Status And funding.....	9

# 1. Background- insufficient funding & reputation at stake

Published in 2021, Higher Education Research and Development Survey revealed that Ireland's % of GDP spent on research is less than the EU and OECD %. Furthermore, the total researchers (doctoral and research masters student) devoted to research work have only increased from 5,072 in 2008 to 6,143 in 2018.<sup>1</sup>

While Ireland has a long-standing ambition under the Lisbon Agenda and the 2004 R&D Action Plan, to achieve a 2.5% of GNP in respect of Gross Expenditure on Research and Development (GERD), it has consistently fallen short of this target.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it is important to recognise that there is insufficient information available about how core funding is distributed, managed, and delivers value-for-money.<sup>3</sup> Among all the Western European countries, Ireland is the only country where PhD researchers are paid less than the minimum wage, and have no public service status<sup>4</sup>. PhD Stipend to Living Cost Ratio in Ireland is 0.58, which is one of the lowest in the EU, UK, Canada, Australia, and Singapore etc.

Ireland's national strategy had been less effective in the attraction of international staff and researchers. This may reflect the fact that the attraction of international faculty including researchers is dependent on a wide range of areas including remuneration levels, university rankings, working and immigration conditions and the cost of living in Ireland. The success of international education in Ireland would be measured by the quality and international reputation of Ireland's academic offering and Ireland's research base.

The concern highlighted above is borne out by the fact that Ireland's country rankings have recently fluctuated in each of three significant international ranking systems as follows:

- Global scientific ranking (GSI) (SFI Annual Report 2018: source InCites); ranking fallen marginally from 10<sup>th</sup> in 2016 to 12<sup>th</sup> in 2018,
- Global Innovation Index (GII) 2022<sup>5</sup>: ranking fallen from 10<sup>th</sup> in 2018 to 23<sup>rd</sup> place in 2022.
- European Innovation Scoreboard (EIS) 2022<sup>6</sup> financial support for HE has remained stagnant 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/00d67-higher-education-research-and-development-survey-2018-2019/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/R-D-Budget-2018-2019.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/36a37-review-of-irelands-higher-education-research-system-higher-education-research-group/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://sinaahmadi.github.io/posts/phd-in-ireland-vs-europe-a-comparative-overview.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/wipo-pub-2000-2022-section3-en-gii-2022-results-global-innovation-index-2022-15th-edition.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/f0e0330d-534f-11ed-92ed-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-272941691>

## 2. Way forward- Ireland must invest more in higher education research.

In Ireland, research activity has equally proven to be central to economic performance. The Department of Business, Enterprise, and Innovation (DBEI) 2016 Review of Economic and Enterprise Impacts from Public Investment in R&D in Ireland<sup>7</sup> found that R&D activity in agency firms have been driving growth in sales, exports, and value-added from 2003-2014. The 2017 DBEI Review of Capital Expenditure on R,D&I (2000-2016)<sup>8</sup> found that innovation-active firms displayed greater resilience and growth in terms of rates of employment, exports and value-added.

State Funding Programme	Net Turnover Impact - experienced (per € invested in each programme)	Net Turnover Impact -projected (per € invested in each programme)
Applied Research Enhancement Centres (now the Technology Gateways)	€5.85	€12.31
Innovation Partnerships	€6.69	€26.35
Innovation Vouchers	€7.65	€27.76

A recent review of Ireland's higher education research system 2021<sup>9</sup> stressed that HE Research has an important part to play in key nationwide agendas such as Project Ireland 2040 and Future Jobs Ireland. The 2019 Indecon analysis<sup>10</sup> for the IUA (Irish Universities Association) calculated that the net premium for a PhD over an undergraduate degree in Ireland is €116,000. A 2022 report on the Review Of International Education Strategy 2016 to 2020<sup>11</sup> reported that international education has a major gross impact of €2.38 billion on the Irish economy. Indecon has estimated a Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR) of 1.67 in baseline model, indicating that for every €1 of costs associated with international students visiting Ireland, there is €1.67 in benefits.

<sup>7</sup> <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Economic-Enterprise-Impacts-Public-Investment-RD-Ireland.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/Publication-files/Review-Capital-Expenditure-Research-Development-and-Innovation-2000-2016.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/36a37-review-of-irelands-higher-education-research-system-higher-education-research-group/>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.iua.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Indecon-Independent-Assessment-of-the-Economic-and-Social-Impact-of-the-Irish-Universities\\_full-report-4.4.19-3.pdf](https://www.iua.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Indecon-Independent-Assessment-of-the-Economic-and-Social-Impact-of-the-Irish-Universities_full-report-4.4.19-3.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3fac2-review-of-international-education-strategy-2016-to-2020/>

## 3. USI Recommendations

### 3.1 Funding and Financial Supports

- USI call for reduction in the Student Contribution Charge.
- Remove funding, legal, support parities and inequities in the system.
- Direct allocation of funds to the underfunded student cohorts including PhDs, masters by research, Student Nurses and Midwives, Psychological Doctoral Students, Creative arts students etc.
- Bring reforms in funding, financial assistance, SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland), and SAF (Student Assistance Fund). On SUSI, we recommend the maintenance grant should be increased to reflect the cost of living in Ireland. This should also be in view to expanding SUSI to part-time learners, as well as recognising estranged students without additional documentation.
- Give a refund, discount or reimbursement to students who do not qualify under the free fees scheme.
- The Student Assistance Fund to be extended to postgraduate students and the eligibility criteria for postgraduate students applying for SUSI to be addressed.
- Form policy to provide a living wage and financial assistance for students who go on placement as part of their degree.
- Remove Parity of Funding for Technological Universities
- Conduct a national review of the support available to postgraduate taught students as well as current fees. Create a national policy to regularize, standardize and cease the cost of postgraduate courses.
- Increase open access funds and opportunities and take swift action to combat the extortionate subscription costs of publishing and access.
- USI also notes that international students and asylum seekers should have targeted measures, including the removal of the residency criteria from the Free Fees initiative for Asylum Seekers.
- For apprentices, removing the apprenticeship registration fee would mean students, especially those who may not be able to afford the cost of college and choose alternative options, can ensure their worries are reduced.

### 3.2 Student participation in decision making

- Bring forward a Students' Union Bill that includes (but is not limited to) a comprehensive definition of a Students' Union, and guaranteed funding for Students' Unions via a per capita model.
- Increase participation of Students in policy, governance, and quality enhancement
- Increased representation of postgraduate Researchers in relevant national forums, groups, boards, and stakeholders related to postgraduate policies and reforms.
- Elected postgraduate representatives should be engaged and appointed to institutional committees, review teams, and working groups on the PGR (postgraduate researchers) programmes, policies, regulations, and reforms. Ensure a clear governance and transparency both within HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) and the HEA (Higher Education Authority) in decision-making regarding matters relating to postgraduate researchers.
- Postgraduate researchers should have access to transparent and independent appeal structures and processes to deal with issues of conflicts and grievances between postgraduate researchers, supervisors, and other bodies within an institution.

### 3.3 Access in HE

- Establish an appealing, inclusive, supportive, and sustainable environment for all undergraduate students and postgraduate researchers and students in Ireland.
- Improved access and support for all who wish to pursue education and research. This includes increases in funding to disability services to ensure HEIs are compliant with both the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Equal Status Act; ensuring compliance with the Athena SWAN charter in all HEIs; restoring funding to HEI (Higher Education Institutions) health and mental health services to pre-2008 levels and expanding services to allow for universal, free healthcare for all postgraduates.
- For both students on placement and students under 20 years old should be paid a living wage.

- In direct access needs, continuing funding of the device lending scheme and increased investment of ICT facilities in lecture halls can improve accessibility for students.
- Introduce additional supports for part-time students and PGRs (postgraduate researchers)

### **3.4 Student Accommodation and commuting**

- Develop an up to date student accommodation strategy that is reflective of the actions needed to alleviate the stress and pressure placed on students who should have access to affordable, suitable student accommodation.
- We can universally recognize the student accommodation situation is the worst it has ever been, and urgent action is needed as such. Our main asks are the introduction of legislation to protect students in house-sharing “digs” situations as well as a new Student Accommodation Strategy, which prioritizes capital grants to build purpose-built student accommodation on public land and reviews change of use permissions for private student accommodation.
- Introduce free transportation for students to remove additional cost burden for students.
- Many students, by choice or otherwise, will need to commute to HEIs across the country and face high costs depending on distance. To reduce these costs, we call for the Young Adult Card (YAC) to be expanded to those who are 24 years old so students who may just leave higher education can still avail, as well as urgently ensuring private operators can accept the YAC by the start of term so all students can benefit from reduced fares, especially rural students.

### **3.5 Welfare Support**

- On mental health, students face significant additional stress with financial pressures more prevalent than ever affecting their mental health, and lack of time to study due to working. We call for the hiring of new FTE counsellors to meet best practice of 1 counsellor per 1000 students.

- On Sexual Health, expand the free contraception scheme to all ensures any student can avail of this and treat contraception as a public necessity like period products.
- On physical health, establishing a drug liaison nurse and an alcohol liaison nurse specific to students, ensuring students can learn about the risks of alcohol and drugs and be empowered to use them in a safe way in tandem with the continuation of specific campaigns on drug harm reduction.

### 3.6 Career Development

- Provide appropriate training, support, resources, and facilities for all postgraduates performing teaching and other work at the institution.
- Provide a safe, accessible, and healthy working environment for postgraduate researchers, including appropriate orientation, training, research expenses, dedicated workspace, meeting office, printing services, appropriate research equipment, tools, software, facilities, research travel funds, opportunities, and technical support.
- Abolish precarity in higher education and research. Ensure that postgraduate researchers in higher education and research, including those on part-time programmes, have clear and secure career pathways, resources, and support.
- All work allocated to postgraduate researchers should be recognized and compensated fairly in the contract.

### 3.7 International education and research

International education has a major gross impact of €2.38 billion on the Irish economy<sup>12</sup>. However, Ireland's attraction of international researchers is affected by low remuneration levels, working and immigration conditions etc. There is an urgent need to make reforms on some of the key legislative/ immigration barriers in recruiting and retaining international and non-EU postgraduate researchers in Ireland. USI calls on the government to remove the difference in immigration stamps and hosting status (The Third Country Researchers Directive<sup>13</sup>) between the IRC/SFI/HEIs-funded non-EEA PhD researchers and EU/Marie Curie PhD researchers. This recommendation is

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3fac2-review-of-international-education-strategy-2016-to-2020/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d3465-third-country-researchers-directive/>

aligned with Ireland's national research strategy Impact 2030<sup>14</sup> which aims to attract the best students globally to take part in the Irish experience, as well as the Department of Justice's vision of a safe, fair, and inclusive Ireland. USI has noticed an increase in visa refusals of PhD researchers on insufficient funding grounds despite winning IRC/SFI or HEIs' scholarships. The duration of residence permits should at the very least match the duration of the course PGRs are enrolled in. The visa issues for non-EU PhDs' spouses and children due to ambiguities in the Family Reunification policy should be addressed urgently. We also urge reforms on the availability of medical cards for Non-EEA PhD researchers.

- Remove mobility and internationalisation barriers for undergraduate and postgraduates
- Increased funding of student exchange programmes and availability of grants.
- The department should be proactive to secure the implementation of a travel visa waiver - or visa exemption - system within the Irish state for all international students
- Improve access for migrant education
- Implement reforms to end discrimination against non-EU postgraduate researchers that include but are not limited to end unjust visa restrictions and refusals for postgraduate researchers and their spouses and dependent children; Abolish the recurrent cost of a300 for the renewal of the Irish Residence Permit (IRP) for PGRs; The fair provision of Hosting Agreement Schemes to non-EU postgraduate researchers; Sponsorship and processing fees for visas, Garda vetting, and residence permits should be adequately funded by the HEIs, funding agencies and the government; The time spent in postgraduate research by non-EU postgraduate researchers should be counted toward naturalization and residency; Provide working rights to the spouses of non-EE postgraduate researchers; Provide access and assistance for healthcare, affordable health insurance, disability benefits, and paid maternity, paternity, and sick leave.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/27c78-impact-2030-irelands-new-research-and-innovation-strategy/>



### 3.8 Postgraduate Researchers Status And funding

Recognize all postgraduate researchers (PhDs and postgraduates doing master by research) engaged in research at Irish higher education and research system as employees with employee status, contracts of employment, and collective bargaining rights under the Irish Law. Contracts should include adequate and equitable social security provisions such as sickness and parental benefits, protective leave, maternity and paternity leave, contract extension under extenuating conditions, and pension rights.

European Charter for Researchers recommends the recognition of researchers as professionals from all levels (e.g., employee, postgraduate student, doctoral candidate, postdoctoral fellow etc.).<sup>15</sup> Irish higher education institutions and organizations have signed and endorsed the Charter but none of them recognizes postgraduate researchers as research professionals.<sup>16</sup> Postgraduate research candidates are working on an equal basis [to other staff] and should therefore also have equal working conditions. Doctoral researchers should be considered junior research and teaching staff who contribute to the creation of new knowledge. The recognition of PhDs as early-career researchers is also consistent with the EUA (European University Association) Council for Doctoral Education (EUA-CDE)'s Vision for the Future of Doctoral Education in Europe<sup>17</sup> which recommends that "The work of doctoral candidates should be appropriately rewarded." CSO (Central Statistics Office) (Central Statistics Office Ireland)<sup>18</sup> also uses the Frascati Manual 2015<sup>19</sup> definition of the researchers as 'professionals engaged in the conception or creation of new knowledge. They conduct research and improve or develop concepts, theories, models, techniques instrumentation, software, or operational methods.' By function, PhD researchers meet the same criteria.

Researchers at the postgraduate level should be paid at least a living wage. Annually, living wages should be reviewed while considering the cost of housing and living in

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<sup>15</sup> [https://www.euraxess.at/sites/default/files/am509774cee\\_en\\_e4.pdf](https://www.euraxess.at/sites/default/files/am509774cee_en_e4.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> [https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/jobs/charter/declaration-endorsement#show\\_Ireland](https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/jobs/charter/declaration-endorsement#show_Ireland)

<sup>17</sup> <https://eua.eu/component/attachments/attachments.html?id=3732>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-sdg9/irelandsunsdgs-goal9industryinnovationandinfrastructure2021/innovation/#d.en.276634>

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/science-and-technology/frascati-manual-2015\\_9789264239012-en;jsessionid=vY8ngNfPdA1ke0ImnPdH8r9YP85-6CuDtiZUJSqE.ip-10-240-5-108](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/science-and-technology/frascati-manual-2015_9789264239012-en;jsessionid=vY8ngNfPdA1ke0ImnPdH8r9YP85-6CuDtiZUJSqE.ip-10-240-5-108)

each county. There are stipend inequalities across Ireland. According to the USI postgraduate stipend survey 2022<sup>20</sup> average stipend rates are €13,850 for universities, €11,067 for IOT/TUs and €9,071 for MA tracking PhD. This is additional to about 18.7% of Postgraduate Research students report being entirely self-funded and those doing postgraduate on a part-time basis. The stipends are as low as €6,000 and as high as €18,500 for IRC/SFI funded PGRs. The findings from postgraduate researchers were also presented to HEA Research and Graduate Education Committee and the NFDE (National Framework for Doctoral Education) Advisory Group.

There are enormous disparities in various PhD funding programmes in Irish Research System. In 2022, The government announced Innovate for Ireland, a new scheme to attract up to 400 PhD candidates on a stipend of €28,000 per year.<sup>21</sup> This leaves more than 8,000 full-time existing PhD researchers, who are facing a significant stipend gap. In comparison to Ireland's highest scholarships awards of €18,500, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Doctoral Researchers receive a monthly living allowance of c. €3,400 (€40,800 per annum), along with other benefits. In 2022, IUA recommended that all PhD stipends to be increased to €24,000.<sup>22</sup>

The IUA 2020 report<sup>23</sup> found €8.9Bn return per annum from 7 Irish Universities from government investment of €1Bn. The return from Irish Universities proves that €65 million additional investment in this case would see a return of €1.9BN to the economy. As per EUA Council for Doctoral Education<sup>24</sup>, the level of financial support for doctoral researchers is inadequate.... financial worries are recognised as a major source of stress and mental health issues for doctoral candidates. A sustainable allocation and fair distribution of funding is crucial to ensure high-quality doctoral and postgraduate research.

An estimate of additional costs needed for providing living wage (€13.85 per hour/ **€28,808 per annum**)<sup>25</sup> will require DFHERIS to allocate only about 1.67% (€65 million)

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<sup>20</sup> <https://usi.ie/postgraduate-affairs/usi-postgraduate-stipend-survey/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.sfi.ie/research-news/news/innovate-for-ireland/>

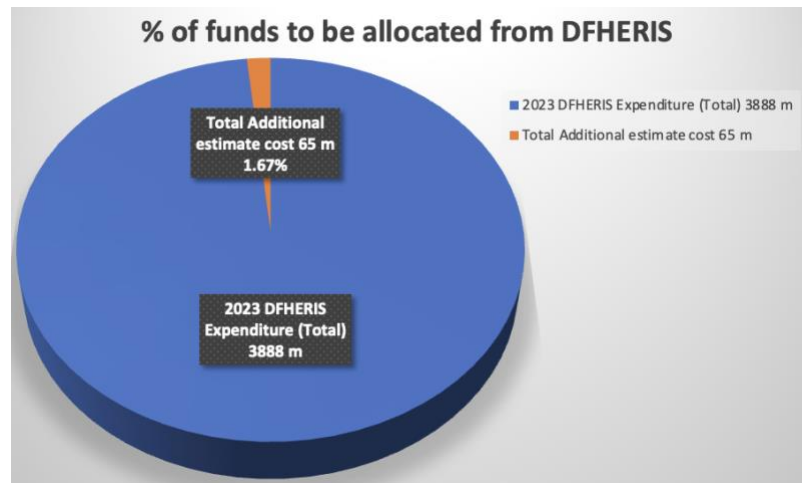
<sup>22</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-03369-1>

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.iua.ie/publications/indecon-independent-assessment-of-the-economic-and-social-impact-of-the-irish-universities\\_full-report/](https://www.iua.ie/publications/indecon-independent-assessment-of-the-economic-and-social-impact-of-the-irish-universities_full-report/)

<sup>24</sup> <https://eua.eu/component/attachments/attachments.html?id=3732>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.livingwage.ie/>

of their total 2023 budget of 3,888 million<sup>26</sup>. The sustainable investment and allocation of funds for PhD researchers will enable DFHERIS to ‘position Ireland as a Global Innovation Leader, driving an internationally competitive research and development system, creating an innovative enterprise base and building a better society.’



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<sup>26</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/eb6ec-budget-2023-expenditure-reports/>