

The Government has a €65 bn 'rainy day fund'!

IT'S RAINING NOW.

Pre-Budget Submission

Budget 2024



Union of Students in Ireland
Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

Foreword from the President

Dublin, 10 September 2023

A Chara,

In 2023, students expressed their lack of confidence in the current leadership of this country. As President of the Union of Students in Ireland, I consider that perspective vital and urgent. This government's dependence on neoliberal policies that enrich the rich and impoverish the poor must end. Although our nation is no longer a poor one, welfare state values are absent in our efforts to improve our people's lives and futures.



Chris Clifford
Uachtarán 2023-2024

Ireland can now afford to invest in its future.

Our budget surplus is expected to reach €65 billion in the following years. It's inexcusable that students couch-surf, commute enormous distances, and have no hope of a future in Ireland whilst government has the capacity to fund that future. A long-term investment in the unstable higher education sector is an option for government right now. Finance can no longer be used as the excuse, but rather the priorities of our politicians. Students' priorities have been dismissed under this and previous governments.

Appallingly, education is no longer treated as a public good in Ireland. Students must be prioritized a necessary long-term strategy to address the hidden costs of education and abolish the Student Contribution Fees model, disguised as a 'Free Fees' model. Successive governments bear the full responsibility for the current student living crisis, which degrades students and the concept of scholarship. For years, everyone, including the current government, has accepted the need for cheap purpose-built student housing. Right now, there is no long-term policy to realise the solution.

The Government should move in this budget to restore the faith of students in it, and in a future in this country. They must start a definitive shift towards a truly publicly funded higher education sector. Once-off measures, like those seen part of Budget 2023, are immediately needed but should not be mistaken for long-term investment in the sector. Short term measures to address the cost of living are urgently needed, but must be broad enough in their scope to benefit all students. In 2023, international students and postgraduate researchers were excluded from supports despite being subject to the same difficult circumstances imposed by the repeated failures in policy.

The Pre-Budget Submission Paper summarizes the main concerns of existing and prospective Irish students. It shows our ongoing commitment to policies and investments that benefit present and future students. The proposals in this document are based on our belief that a well-funded and accessible education system is essential to a fair and thriving society.

Ní Neart Go Cur Le Chéile!

Chris Clifford
President
The Union of Students in Ireland

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Acknowledgements

USI wishes to thank its members and representatives for their engagement in the process of developing this Pre-Budget Submission.

Additionally, USI wishes to thank members of the Oireachtas for their kind attention to our requests for information, costings and their consistent engagement with the drafting of this submission.

Our thanks, too, to staff at various government departments who responded to our requests for projections and costings. We appreciate that this has been time consuming and complex work and we are happy to have had the opportunity to engage with you.

We wish to acknowledge the input of members of the Coiste Gnó and staff at USI for their support in producing the document.

Cost of Being a Student in Ireland

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI), representing the interests and welfare of students across the nation, acknowledges the marginal improvements in the current cost-of-living crisis. However, we argue that the Government's unwavering commitment to neoliberal economic policies, constantly serving the interests of landlords and multinational corporations, on the expense of the welfare and future of students.

Whilst figures suggest that the rate of inflation has dropped, on the ground students are facing unprecedented costs associated with their education. Figures show that 33% of the total student population say that they are experiencing serious or very serious financial problems. This is an increase from 26% of students from 2019 and reflects the policy approach taken to mitigate the effects of the crisis on students.

The use of once-off measures and the inclusion of a 'cost-of-living' package in Budget 2023 only went so far, yet the cycle remains and our expectations from the ruling parties can only go as far.

While we maintain our position of no confidence in the current Government, we recognize the immediate need to address the challenges faced by our students and urgently call on the Government to introduce immediate reliefs to mitigate the effects suffered by students at all levels. The Government sits on a budget surplus that allows for the introduction of much needed immediate reliefs, and for making long-term investment to make our economic and social landscape welfare-orientated.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Abolishing the Student Contribution Fees for Third-Level Education.
- » A further €1,000 reduction to fees from the reduction in Budget 2023, bringing the total fees for all students €1000 for 2023/24
- » The introduction of a National Rent Freeze.
- » Immediately expediting the execution of the plan for the implementation of the National Living Wage in place of the minimum wage planned for 2026.

- » Implementing a living wage for apprentices and abolishing sub-minimum wage rates for those under 20 years old.
- » For such rate of remuneration to be codified in the Construction Safety Licensing Bill, which is proceeding through the Dáil currently.
- » Implementing a €25,000 national stipend for all postgraduate researchers in the country. Free Public Transport for all Students.
- » The immediate production of the Student Accommodation Strategy with a goal of providing capital grants to the effect of providing 30,000 extra beds in the form of publicly owned Purpose-Built Student Accommodation.

Cost of Commuting

The absence of adequate and affordable student accommodation has resulted in an increased number of students facing extremely long commutes. The cost of travel remains to pose significant financial burdens

“The Government sits on a budget surplus that allows for making long-term investment to make our economic and social landscape welfare-orientated”

on students and the community at wide and the current infrastructure falls short of the standard required.

The reduction in transport fees has helped many

students in reducing their costs, however, significant long-term investment in public transport is needed to truly address the issues arising in the context of commuting.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Expanding the Youth Travel Card to 24 years old - €5 million
- » Creating a bike-to-college scheme similar to the bike-to-work scheme - €0.5million per annum
- » Expanding bike sharing schemes outside of major cities - €1.3 million per 15-station scheme (€6.5 for 5 cities)
- » Acceleration of the BusConnects scheme in Dublin and other Irish cities
- » Improving bus services on current routes including reliability of services
- » Free Public Transport for Students

Student Accommodation Crisis

The latest official documentation of the student accommodation crisis has been through the figures presented as part of the 'Funding the Future' (2024) options paper, which show that 29,773 students who have applied for public Purpose-Built Student Accommodation will be rejected a place to live.

According to recent figures, 42% of students live in the private rental sector, while 40% live with their parents, leaving around 18% of the total student population living in PBSA. These figures show that the shortage of beds in comparison to applications is only a small fraction of the issue on the ground.

The student accommodation crisis has been documented on numerous occasions over the past 10 years. In 2018, the Government identified the need for an additional 21,000 beds by 2024. The exact number of beds developed since 2018 is not made public, but does not exceed 6,000. There is a complete absence of long-term policy responses to the student living crisis, and indeed any hopes for having any improvements to the situation in the long-term. DFHERIS has provided little to no guidance to students as to what measures are being taken to resolve this multi-faceted crisis, an approach that, once again, does not allow for any genuine democratic accountability as to the performance of this Government in resolving this crisis. To this date, DFHERIS implemented one initiative that is classified and sold to students as a long-term solution to the crisis: An advertising campaign asking homeowners to rent rooms to students.

While the shortage has been outlined by the Department, reported figures on the development of extra beds through PBSA do not exceed 1,065 for the coming year. Additionally, the total number of potential beds based off granted planning permissions do not exceed 15,000 beds. Most of such projects have not exceeded the idea stage and are not a reason to build any hope for the short or medium term. As these projects are privately owned, and developed for profit, the Government has no sway on the planning timelines of such projects.

USI rejects outright any claim from this Government to the effect of classifying third-level education as a public good in this country and challenges the entirety of its efforts on tackling the student accommodation crisis since its formation in 2021.

USI submits an immediate demand from the Government to take all necessary measures to ensure the quick and effective roll-out of projects that will yield affordable PBSA. Ultimately, USI believes in a publicly funded model for student housing that shields students from being treated as a vulnerable party by other market actors.

The Right to Housing

Policy initiatives relating to housing have been landlord-centric and, hence the priorities have fallen short of what students need in this area.

Additionally, the national cost of living crisis is one that affects every member of the community.

Establishing the right to housing in Bunreacht Na hÉireann is fundamental and prerequisite to ensuring a policy direction that truly strikes a balance between the Right to Housing and the Private Property Rights which shall be limited to serve the wider public good in times of crisis.

Asks & Recommendations

- » The Government to put to the people a referendum on Establishing the Right to Housing in the Constitution
- » To have the Right to Housing implied in future policies
- » The Introduction of a Rent Freeze until such a point the effects of the Cost-of-Living crisis are naturalized, and the rate of inflation stabilizes at pre-crisis levels.

Measures to Increase the Supply of Affordable Student Accommodation

Capital Grants for Affordable Purpose-Built Student Accommodation

The Options Paper acknowledges the primacy of the development of PBSA in the resolution of the current student accommodation crisis. The Government has previously provided funding, on the premise of affordability, for the development of public PBSA. However, such funding has been inconsistent, insufficient and the premise of affordability associated with the funding was not strictly applied. It is submitted that such projects should provide the accommodation on a cost-rental basis only.

The 2017 Student Accommodation Strategy

Student Accommodation Crisis

predominantly resulted in luxury student-accommodation, leaving 81% of students living in PBSA at the mercy of property owners. Instead of providing for affordable accommodation that directly relieves the students when it had the chance, the Government allowed and relied upon profiteering on the expense of students.

In November of 2022, the Government communicated its policy relating to the supply of Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) with the goal of ensuring that priority-group students can find affordable places to live while they study. The same policy pledged the development of a new Student Accommodation Strategy (SAS) between April and June 2023, we observe with concern the absence of its finalization. It is noted that this strategy was also outlined as a key commitment of the Housing for All plan, introduced in 2021.

Asks & Recommendations

- » The provision of consistent and transparent funding, in the form of capital grants to HEIs, on the premise of affordability, for the development of a further 30,000 beds by 2029.
- » For such grants to be extended to Technological Universities on the same terms.
- » The development and implementation of a new SAS that predominantly provides for the expedited development of affordable public PBSA through the provision of capital grants by November 2023.
- » The provision, through law, of a framework for determining the conditions for affordability for projects financed through capital grants, capping rent prices at cost-rental.

State-Provided Emergency Student Accommodation

For at least the past 5 years, stories of students who are due to return to commence their education with no roof over their head are well documented.

The Options Paper outlines the number of students that will be rejected accommodation in PBSA for the 2023/24 academic year. Despite making available these figures almost a full month prior to the commencement of learning, no measures have been adopted to alleviate, in the immediate term, this issue.

Asks & Recommendations

- » The Government to make available emergency accommodation at the beginning of each academic year for students who are due to commence their education without securing accommodation for the first 6 weeks of term.
- » Annual cost of €1.35

The Creation of an Emergency Student Accommodation Fund for Students' Unions

While most cases of students finding themselves without accommodation arise during the first quarter of the academic year, in the absence of needed intervention from the Government, cases also arise during the academic year.

Asks & Recommendations

- » The creation of an emergency student accommodation fund, to be administered by student unions for students that may require emergency accommodation during the academic year.
- » For such fund to be provided in addition, and not instead of, emergency accommodation for the first quarter of the year.
- » Costing: €440K

Social Housing for Students

The provision of funding for the development of PBSA is one part investment needed for long-term solutions to tackle the student accommodation crisis once and for all. The Government must also make available, on a cost-rental basis, social housing for students to truly resolve the student accommodation crisis.

Compulsory purchasing and rental of vacant and derelict properties and reusing them to provide affordable accommodation for students is essential to the resolution of the crisis.

Asks & Recommendations:

- » Establishing a social housing model for student accommodation providing public cost rental Purpose Built Student Accommodation.
- » For such model to be based upon securing and reusing vacant and derelict properties.

Reinstating the Eviction Ban

Until such point where the shortage of student

Student Accommodation Crisis

accommodation is adequately addressed, immediate measures to prevent an increase in the rates of homelessness amongst students are urgently needed. USI requests the immediate reinstatement of the nationwide ban on no-fault evictions. The eviction ban is viewed as a measure to mitigate the asymmetric balance of power in the current rental sector where tenants are seen to compromise on their rights so as not to lose their home. Additionally, the burden of identifying landlords in breach of the requirement, set out under Section 137 of the Residential Tenancies Act, to register tenancies with the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) remains on the tenant, exposing them to the possibility of eviction when pursuing their rights.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Reinstating the eviction ban until such point where supply reasonably covers the demand for

USI requests the immediate reinstatement of the nationwide ban on no-fault evictions

housing.

Rent-A-Room Scheme

A comprehensive protection scheme for students living in digs

The Rent-a-Room scheme, facilitating the availability of digs accommodation, forms one of the most sidelined ways students rely on accommodation, when a lack of affordable PBSA is available. Government continues to push the scheme and has on multiple occasions indicated the reliance on 'digs' accommodation to increase the supply of student accommodation in the long-term.

USI position in relation to the emphasis of this style of accommodation as a primary solution to the student accommodation crisis is twofold.

Firstly, this option shall only be viewed as a short-term and secondary one, while emphasis must remain on increasing the amount of affordable PBSA and social housing for students. The second is that, given the spending of taxpayer money and wide encouragement from the Government for students

to avail of options arising from the uptake of the scheme, the Government ought to ensure minimum protections and standards through the enactment of legislation immediately.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Legislation to protect students in "digs" accommodation providing for minimum notice periods, an obligation on homeowners to enter into a tenancy agreement, measures that ensure access to essential amenities and minimum standards in a manner similar to the Residential Tenancies Act 2004.
- » Ensuring the enforceability of Rent Pressure Zones Legislation to such uses.

“A €65 Billion ‘Rainy Day’ fund? Students who can’t get affordable accommodation to study are fed up telling this government it’s raining now”

Chris Clifford, USI President

A Publicly Funded HE System

USI believes that education, including third-level and further education, is a right and calls upon policy to reflect that. While the student contribution charge is constantly referred to as ‘free fees’, the current model of funding has led to Ireland having the highest in the EU for undergraduate students. We reject, outright, any claim that third-level education in Ireland is publicly provided until such point where the student contribution fee is abolished.

Investment in the Higher Education System is shaped by the Cassells report, which is a pathway for an education system that is publicly funded, and free at the point of entry. Investment in the Higher Education System should follow Option 1 of the Cassells report. At this moment, the current investment does not match the gaps identified in the report, calling for the investment of €307 million in core funding in higher and further education to ensure stability to the sector.

International Students and Students Residing outside the ROI

While undergraduate fees for undergraduate students qualifying for the ‘free fees initiative’ are the highest in the EU, international students pay up to twenty times that fee. Additionally, they face increased expenses such as residency permit renewal fees, language courses and the general costs of international relocation. The enrollment of international students in Irish HEIs adds far more value than the fees associated with their study, yet they are viewed as an alternative for core funding in the higher education sector and research and innovation.

Students and young people have lost confidence in this Government and in the leadership of this country. The aspiration of leaving the country to countries where the values of welfare, redistribution and equality are truly embedded in policy. Yet, under the current residency requirements needed for eligibility for EU fee rates, it is constantly made harder for those who wish to return to Ireland for education.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Core funding of €307 million in full to fulfill the gap identified in the Cassells Report. - €307m
- » The complete abolition of the student contribution fees by 2027, matched by annual reductions in the meantime – annual cost of €254.7m.
- » A further reduction of €1000 to the once-off reduction of €1000 in Budget 2023, to bring a total once-off reduction of €2000 for all students in light of the increased costs of living - €183.8.
- » Transparency around the use of postgraduate and international fees, and a plan for the reduction of such fees.
- » The removal of the residency requirement associated with free fees eligibility for Irish and European students wishing to receive third-level education in Ireland.

The abolition of fees, both visible and hidden

The approach to look merely at the impact of the student contribution fee on the financial wellbeing of student and the accessibility of education is incomplete without looking at the hidden costs associated with education. Hidden additional costs serve as a further reminder of the marketized Higher Education system that students across the island are being subjected to and may further inhibit students from progressing in their education particularly where these costs are mandatory.

Additionally, the Student Grant, although in need of certain reforms, provides some relief for the most financially vulnerable students. Yet, the hidden costs that arise in various contexts remain a major driver of the costs of being a student.

€307 million in core funding in higher and further education to ensure stability to the sector.

The Student Assistance Fund (SAF) which provides some assistance to students in areas that are not covered by the grant attempts to deal with various hidden costs. Funding for the Student Assistance Fund must remain at post-pandemic levels to mitigate the effects of the cost of living on students. While the SAF provides relief to students, reducing hidden costs through core funding remains needed. Multiple cohorts, including international students, do not qualify for the SAF, and USI’s position is that

A Publicly Funded HE System

the fund should be extended to all students in need of such support, regardless of their tuition status. Once-off top ups to the SAF provide no stability to the sector or to the students that will undoubtedly need to access the fund. Core funding, base-lined at post-pandemic levels, is required to ensure that students facing hidden costs and other increased financial burdens.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Continued annual funding for the SAF at post-pandemic levels, taking into account the rate of inflation - €25m.
- » Ensuring the eligibility of all students for accessing the SAF by enforcing a standardized approach for all HEIs when assessing requests to access funds from the SAF.

Student Placements

Maintenance Grant for Students on Compulsory Placement

An increasing number of course involves a compulsory component of practical placement, for which students incur hidden costs. Such costs may cover equipment, additional commutes and even accommodation if a placement involves the temporary relocation of the student. Students with compulsory placement components are not supported financially to fulfill this component of

Students working on placement are often a fundamental support to their sectors.

their course, and in most cases, such funding is also not provided by the HEI.

Placement is a form of work, whether it is classified as a form of 'learning on the job' or a learning component. Students working through placement are often a fundamental support to the sectors they work in, such as role of student nurses as part of the effort to combat COVID-19. Additionally, students on placement have additional obligations as a result of blurring the lines between education and work, and must be fairly compensated.

Students enrolled in courses that have placement aspect suffer additional costs because of the

requirement to undertake placement due to additional equipment, the need to relocate for certain rotations of placement and, in some cases, foregoing income they would have otherwise made.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Implementing €500 maintenance grants for students on mandatory placement – *Costing request made to DFHERIS was not fulfilled.*
- » The payment of living wage to all students engaged in mandatory placement as part of their study.

International Students

Permission to Remain in the State – Stamp 2

International students on Stamp 2 are required to renew their permission to remain in the state every year. The renewal costs students €300 per year.

The purpose of the renewal is updating any personal information that might have changed over the year, and to prove that the student is still enrolled in their course and is progressing as intended.

This information can be obtained from HEIs directly, and a digital mechanism for updating personal information can be provided to relieve students of the difficult process and the costs associated with it.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Granting Stamp 2 residency permits for the entire length of the course, eliminating the yearly charge of €300 – No Cost to Exchequer.

Access to Materials

Creative Courses

The underfunding of both the Arts and Higher Education Sectors is reflected in the extra costs incurred by students in creative courses. Creative arts students often have added costs for software to allow them to fully engage with their course material.

The industry standard currently is full Adobe Suite access, which can cost students upwards of €1,300 for the duration of a four-year degree. Increased collaboration is needed between the DFHERIS and the Department of TCAGSM.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Funding to purchase a full Adobe Suite of

A Publicly Funded HE System

software for creative students - €1.2 million.

- » Creation of a designated "Materials Fund" for creative students - €3 million initially with review at the end of year 1.

Access to Materials

Books and E-Books

Member Unions have shared concerns with USI relating to the costs incurred to students due to the current e-book licensing landscape.

Dominant multinational publishers have significantly increased license fees, imposing undue financial strain on our libraries, institutions, and the taxpayer, while inadequately compensating authors.

Libraries face stringent restrictions on e-book usage, such as limitations on simultaneous views, and unlike print books, they can only license e-books, not purchase them.

Dominant multinational publishers have significantly increased license fees, imposing undue financial strain on our libraries, institutions, and the taxpayer, while inadequately compensating authors.

This licensing model forces libraries to comply with publisher-imposed restrictions, limiting their collection development and access to non-English titles or specific user groups.

The #ebooksos campaign, initiated in the UK and now gaining traction in Ireland, underscores the inequitable practices of these publishers. A glaring example is the exorbitant pricing of e-books for academic use, with some e-books costing up to twenty times their print counterparts.

By August 2023, the campaign's open letter has garnered support from over 5,000 individuals, including the Library Association of Ireland. USI

supports the calls of the campaign and asks for budgetary and legislative reforms to that effect.

In the previous year, higher education and public libraries expended over €3 million on e-books. The disparity in e-book and print costs. Additionally, students in certain courses are required to purchase physical copies of books that might not be provided in an e-book format, in such case the cost is directly incurred by the student.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Doubling the funding provided to IReL for providing access to more e-books through transformative agreements and making students aware of the service - €5.5m.
- » The provision of a textbook subsidy for the benefit of students that are projected to incur textbook costs of more than €50 per academic year.
- » Increased funding for Open Education Resources (OER) and the associated curation infrastructure to ensure sustainable access – approx. €1.25m.
- » Increased transparency and sustainability in ebook costs and licensing – No Cost to Exchequer.
- » To advocate for copyright law reform to remove the requirement for libraries to purchase versions of ebooks licensed specifically for library use which are subject to the aforementioned pricing and licensing obstacles.
- » Allow libraries to scan whole books they own in print where ebooks are unavailable or unaffordable for preservation and for controlled access to support research and learning.

Student Financial Supports

The Student Grant, administered by SUSI, is in need of immediate reform to reflect its goal of an equitable, publicly funded model for higher education, ensuring access to the most financially vulnerable and breaking the cycle of poverty.

The grant affects students differently, depending on their specific needs and the supports they qualify for. USI submits the below asks with two overarching goals; increasing access to the Grant and improving the supports available for those eligible for the Grant.

The Government, this year, has the opportunity to wisely use the revenue generated from Windfall Corporate Tax receipts to redistribute resources to prioritize access to education through providing for significant sustainable reforms to the grant, which are long overdue.

Working and SUSI Holiday and Term Time Earning

The contradictory practice of limiting earnings for students, most in need of financial support must be addressed immediately. USI believes that the thresholds for deductions of earnings from the reckonable income of a student for the purposes of qualifying for the supports under the Grant must be doubled, to be ultimately removed in the longer term.

Holiday Earnings are defined as income earned from employment outside term time, but within the previous calendar year or reference period by an applicant who was in education. For a student to qualify or retain their eligibility for the Student Grant without risking losing any or all the supports they receive, they are limited to earnings of up to €6,552 during their holidays. Not only is this figure not remotely attached to the reality of the cost of living, but it is also in principle counterintuitive and limiting.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Increasing holiday earnings eligible for deduction from reckonable income by doubling the current limit to make it €13,104 – approx. €34m.
- » The removal of provision which limits the

deduction to out-of-term earnings.

Maintenance Grant and Income Thresholds

The Maintenance Grant is the only permanent measure dedicated to putting money back in the pockets of students.

Additionally, the Maintenance Grant allows students to use supports in the way they need to use it, including covering hidden costs associated with third-level education in the absence of adequate funding for hidden costs as previously outlined. Considering the unprecedented surplus at the disposal of the Government, the Cost-of-Living Crisis, and the fact that students in Ireland pay the highest fees in Europe, the current rate of the Grant must be permanently increased.

Increasing the maintenance grant rates can only achieve so much if the current income thresholds remain at their pre-crisis levels. Income thresholds dictate how many students would benefit from the increase in any of the supports under the Grant, including the maintenance grant.

A major reform of the supports under the Grant has been called upon for years, and introducing in such a way is one step closer to both alleviating current and future pressures on the most financially vulnerable students and ensuring access to our Higher Education system in the future.

Asks & Recommendations

- » From the Options Paper, USI would ask for Option 4 - the Combined Maintenance and Threshold. USI contends this approach is by far the most proportional and sustainable.
- » Costing: Full year: €119.8m / 2024 Cost: €81.5m

Translation of Documentation

SUSI requires all supporting documents submitted when applying for the Grant to be in either English or Irish. For example, birth certificates, evidence of nationality, and evidence of parental separation. Any documentation in languages other than English/Irish must be accompanied by an official English translation. Students who are eligible for SUSI that have documents in different languages because of

Student Financial Supports

having lived abroad are affected by this requirement. For students that are already financially vulnerable, the cost of paying for professional translation service fees creates a financial barrier to even applying for the financial supports that they need.

Asks & Recommendations

- » SUSI to provide a dedicated translation service for students and their documentation or cover the cost of such translation– *Costing request made to DFHERIS returned unfulfilled.*

Students Enrolled on a Part-Time Basis

Students enrolled on a part-time basis pay the student contribution fees, and incur the costs associated with third-level education, yet they do not qualify for any supports under the Grant. This is due to the blanket requirement applicable for courses eligible for the grant, namely, full-time courses that last for at least 2 years.

Asks & Recommendations

- » The removal of the blanket requirement for students to be enrolled in a full-time course to become eligible for SUSI, and the establishment of specific rates for students enrolled in courses on a part-time basis.

Graduate Entry Medicine (GEM)

GEM students currently do not qualify for any financial support to complete their course. As it is a graduate entry course, their own solution was to apply for the Bank of Ireland specific loan which has been withdrawn. The course was set up with the aim of diversifying the medical industry and being inclusive, but given the financial barrier, it does not achieve this.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Full contribution to the GEM course fees - €15m

Amending dependent children grant increments within SUSI

The current brackets for dependent children do not reflect the increased costs every family has had to incur over the past years. This mechanism is in place to adequately assess the true cost of dependent children may have on a household when looking to

qualify for the grant. The brackets must be changed to reflect the reality of increasing costs, and we propose the following changes:

With Current Model	Proposed Change
Fewer than 4	Up to 2
4 - 7	3-4
8 or more	5 or more
» Full year cost: €21m Cost 2024: €14.9m	

Postgraduate and PhD Students

Currently, only postgraduate students that qualify for the special rate (household income of less than €25k and must be eligible, under the criteria of the Department of Social Protection(DSP), to DSP a long-term payment, although not necessarily in receipt of such payment) can avail of both the tuition grant contribution and the maintenance grant. Additionally, those who do not qualify for the special rate can only receive up to €4,000 through the tuition grant.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Increasing the postgraduate maintenance grant rates to the same level as the support for undergraduate students across all bands. Full year: €3.9m// 2024 Cost: €1.72m
- » Increasing the income threshold for the special rate to €50k and removing provision setting out the requirement of receiving relief from the Department of Social Protection.
- » Increasing the maximum amount available for postgraduate tuition grant by 56% to become €6,271 per year. Full year cost: €4.1m// 2024 Cost: €3.88m

International Students

International students, specifically those from outside the European Union pay the highest amounts of tuition fees, at rates less favorable to their European counterparts. Yet, Non-EU international students are the only group with restrictions as to how much they could work due to the terms of a student visa. Additionally, international students at wide find themselves at a disadvantage when accessing student support services that are in place to improve access to education.

Student Financial Supports

Asks & Recommendations

- » The removal of provisions relating to the maximum restriction for international students to work while they are on their student visa – No Cost to Exchequer.
- » The establishment of student support in collaboration with HEIs fund specifically to provide financial supports to international students in relation to registering and renewing their permission to remain in the State (student visa).
- » Expanding the Student Assistance Fund allow international students to receive the supports it provides – Costing requested from DFHERIS was not fulfilled

Postgraduate Student Supports

It is submitted that the improvement of terms of work for Postgraduate Students goes hand in hand with improving access to postgraduate degrees. While some factors leading to issues of accessing a postgraduate degree may be like such issues seen at an undergraduate level, there are specific factors that would impede someone's ability to access a postgraduate education. Adequate stipend rates and wider measures ensuring employment rights for postgraduate researchers are imperative to allow a wider access to postgraduate education.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Introduction of a minimum postgraduate stipend rate in line with the outcomes of the *Independent Report on Supports for PhD Researchers in Ireland* at a minimum of €25,000.
- » The introduction of contractual terms through statute to guarantee maternity, paternity, and adequate sick leaves for postgraduate by research programmes.

Asylum Seekers and Refugees

Students who are seeking asylum and refuge in Ireland, who also wish to continue their third level education automatically find themselves at a disadvantage due to the residency requirement associated with qualifying for the Free Fees Initiative.

USI believes that the criteria of the Free-Fees

Initiative should reflect a set of mitigating measures that places asylum seekers and refugees on a more equal ground when accessing third-level education in Ireland. Additionally, HEIs often lack the capacity to facilitate the education of refugees and asylum seekers.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Providing funding for HEIs to increase their capacity to enrol refugees and asylum seekers.
- » Removing the resident criteria from the Free Fees Initiative for Asylum Seekers.
- » Repealing the 27th amendment of the constitution on birthright citizenship.

Universal Design Learning

While Education for All may be seen as applying more to the financial barriers, physical barriers to education still remain for many students. Despite an approach from many HEIs to fully return to campus, most students wish for a mix of in-person and online teaching.

This is seen with just shy of a quarter of students either fairly or totally unsatisfied of the availability of recorded lectures.

Universal Design Learning (UDL) is one of the key ways to ensure a student can enjoy the full student experience and is seen as the gold standard for higher education.

Yet, despite the large number of HEIs that claim to be UDL compliant, there is a lack of information on how many staff are trained and have UDL badges. Further, many lecture halls, classrooms and resources are still not available in hybrid format leaving students who might not be able to attend classes in person at a disadvantage.

Students stand in solidarity with their teachers, and USI believes that staff working conditions are student learning conditions. Investment in UDL to increase access to education through allowing more flexible modes of teaching shall not come at disadvantage to staff, and the work they produce in the context of teaching.

Asks & Recommendations

- » The expansion and continuation of the device lending scheme - €25 million.

Student Financial Supports

- » Increased investment in the digital infrastructure to allow for hybrid learning and teaching - €5 million.
- » Ensuring that staff compensation and working conditions are not negatively impacted by the move towards hybrid education.

Apprenticeship Registration Fee

Apprenticeships are another pathway into further training to have a trade rather than going to college. The recent attitude to move to less traditional forms of education, and the expansion of options available for third-level education is welcomed by USI.

However, the current systems underpinning access to apprenticeships has gradually moved to become more exclusive and lacks the required State supports to truly make it accessible to students.

Apprenticeship education, like other forms of education in the State, must be fully publicly provided and access to education must not be dictated by the financial ability of students.

Asks & Recommendations

- » The removal of apprenticeship registration fees - €11.39 Million.
- » Increase the income that apprentices receive and increase fuel and accommodation allowances for apprentices in line with the real costs of fuel and accommodation.

Mature students and parents

Ireland's lifelong learning participant rate is 11.8% (Eurostat, 2022). This is below the EU 2020 lifelong learning target of 15% (SOLAS, May 2022). In Quarter 4, 2021, 70% of participants in lifelong learning held Third-Level qualifications. Compared to Quarter 4 2019, in Quarter 4 2021 the number of lifelong learning participants declined across each NFQ level group.

The lower the NFQ level, however, the stronger the decline. In 2020, there was a:

- 26% drop in the participation of adults in education/training in Ireland (OECD, 2021a)
- 50% drop in the lifelong learning participation rate for people with lower secondary education (in Q4 2020 compared to Q4 2019, SOLAS, 2021a)
- 49% drop in accreditation awards at NFQ Levels

1-4 compared to 2019 (SOLAS, 2021a).

The above figures, from AONTAS highlight that there is a pressing need, not just to increase Ireland's lifelong learning participation rate, but to focus particularly on those who are less qualified and have faced social, economic and educational inequality and disadvantage.

Asks & Recommendations

- » 1916 bursary: Learners reported the need to broaden the criteria for the 1916 bursary.
- » Back to Education payments should be available to all part-time workers/learners.
- » Many learners must work long hours (significantly more than in previous years due to increases in the cost-of-living) in addition to studying. Tax breaks should be available for such learners so that they can reduce working hours.
- » Provide an additional ring-fenced budget that will enable Education & Training Boards to fully address specific barriers to Further Education and Training faced by learners from all groups that are prioritised in the National Access Plan. The level of additional funding should be sufficient to standardise learner supports available to FE and HE students.
- » Ensure affordable childcare is accessible to any learner who needs it by providing funding to ETBs and Higher Education Institutions to develop on-site childcare facilities and by providing higher rates of childcare subsidy to a broader range of FE and HE learners.

Compared to Quarter 4 2019, in Quarter 4 2021 the number of lifelong learning participants declined across each NFQ level group.

Student Wellbeing

In 2020, the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework was established. The implementation of the framework and the measures entailed for Third-Level Education can only be achieved across HEIs through dedicated funding to that effect.

One of the key actions of the implementation plan is to “provide students with safe, accessible and well-resourced mental health support”. In the past, mental and physical supports for students were provided for on an ‘additional’ basis and the need to ring-fence such funding remains.

HEIs are the first port of call for students who might find themselves in need for health supports; mental, physical and sexual. There is a large disparity in the quality and availability of the services in different HEIs, and the effects of that are deeply felt by students.

Mental Health Supports

Core Multi-annual Funding

Since the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020, counselling supports in third level education have been funded by a core €3 million in the budget and an additional €2 million funding in response to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on student mental health. The record rates seen during the pandemic have not declined, and as such, the pressures on the services provided by HEIs remain at significantly high levels.

Ring fencing core funding for the purposes of mental health supports for students is imperative for the stability of the sector, and must be taken to ensure consistent and equal support to students when they are most in need of such supports, and not when they are able to receive them. USI views the need to reform the way such funding is allocated as a pressing concern that shall be dealt with as an issue of highest priority, and for that to be reflected in public spending.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Multi-annual core funding amount to €6 million in Budget 2024
- » €5 million for maintaining the current service provision.
- » €1 million would help implement the National

Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework; campus mental health and wellbeing programs and student outreach.

Counsellor to Student Ratio

The ratio of counsellors to students for safe and ethical practice seen in international standards is 1:1000 to 1:1500 dependent on service need. Ireland’s current counsellor to student ratio is at unsafe levels, with a staff-student ratio 1:2240 according to PCHEI, the representative body of Psychological Counsellors in Higher Education in Ireland.

This includes all clinical staff (counsellors, directs, assistant psychologists (Aps), and sessional workers, etc.) PCHEI calculate that an investment of 11.5 million is recommended to bring us to a 1:1000 ratio, or a 4.5 million investment in staff to bring us to a 1:1500 ratio. To achieve a 1:1000 ratio would require an FTE of 244, an additional 135 FTE.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Investment in Increasing the Counsellors to Students Ratio - €11.5 million.

Health Services

Student health centres are a particularly vital resource for students who have moved away from home for college, as well as international students, and as noted above is often the first port of call for students seeking health support. This is also, in part, due to the difficulty faced with registering with a new GP when relocating, as often is the case with education. Student health centres provide an invaluable service to the college student population, filling the gap that local services are unable to provide, and the funding dedicated to it must be accordingly allocated.

Campus Health Services

Unfortunately, student health centres are funded on an institution-by-institution basis, and they lack consistency across the country. Many campuses do not have a college health service or have struggled to get a health service running again post-covid. Due to funding struggles, the campuses that do have a running health service are extremely strained and generally have long waiting lists. They can also struggle to provide the full range of health services that would be expected for health centres serving a student population including sexual healthcare, free

Student Wellbeing

contraception and abortion access. We are asking for an increase in governmental support to institutions to assist in providing students with a fully resourced campus GP and Nurse service, so students can access the healthcare they deserve.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Increased investment to allow for full-resourced campus GP and Nursing services across the board.
- » Expanding the free contraception scheme to make it accessible to people of all ages (including non-hormonal) - €146.98 million at 100% uptake, and €110.24 million at 75% uptake.
- » A subsidy for college health centres to include full-suite abortion services within their services.
- » For the HSE to expand free HIV rapid testing and PrEP to within HEIs, ensuring students access to such services on-campus.

Sexual Health and Guidance

Students' Unions take on the task of providing information relating to healthy sexual practices, sexual consent and health services associated with the same. This includes the provisions of Sexual Health and Guidance (SHAG) packs which include condoms, lube, relevant information on support services, using sexual protection, sexual consent and abortion services and PrEP.

Asks & Recommendations

- » The provision of the applicable funding required for the distribution of 50,000 SHAG packs.

Social Equality

Period Products

While it is welcomed that certain education boards have received free period products, there is still a large social inequality for students around the island who cannot afford period products.

Period products are a necessity, and they should not be paid for. Some students miss classes due to their periods, and some students even spend their income on other necessities such as food rather than period products due to food being almost cheaper than period products in the current cost-of-living crisis. Period products are a necessity, just like soap and toilet paper, and should be accessible in most bathrooms across HEIs. In this roll-out we also ask

for suitable, smaller dispensers to be provided in accessible, men's and gender-neutral toilets to ensure all students' menstrual needs are met. In 2023, it is about time that students are not held back because of their periods.

- Free period products have been piloted in certain education boards. Third level education was meant to receive it from the HSE but has not been publicly visible.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Additional €1 million for period products to be distributed to all colleges.

Fund for Students with Disabilities

There has been a significant increase of students coming through DARE on the CAO this year. Last year we had 8,713 apply to CAO through the DARE scheme, this year we had 9,913 apply. That means 14% of students out of the 78,025 students who applied this year are eligible for the FSD. Since COVID-19, we've seen a rise of students applying through the DARE scheme, particularly around their mental health. With more people getting accepted, there needs to be more funding towards the supports for these students.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Additional €1 million for the Fund for Students with Disabilities to accommodate the increase of students applying for the DARE scheme.

T-Fund Creation

Some Students' Unions have developed a T-Fund which is used to cover costs of social changes such as clothes, makeup, binders for chests, etc. It can also be used to help change someone's name for their Gender Recognition Cert or Deed poll. Students' Unions should not be covering the cost for students - this issue should be addressed by specific funding.

For years they have done the same for period products and now there are free period products being provided to colleges. The implementation of a government funded T-Fund for trans and non-binary students will allow for more trans and non-binary students to be able to express themselves the way they want to in college and not have to struggle at the start of their transition with the issues as outlined by **LGBT Ireland** when they carried out a study on

Student Wellbeing

'Mental health and well-being of LGBTI people.'

Asks & Recommendations

- » A government funded T-fund to be established for all colleges.

Implementation of self-identification of legal gender, including non-binary legal recognition

Currently, Trans/Non-Binary students go into college being known as their dead-name (their name before they transitioned that they no longer associated themselves with). This can be a very uncomfortable situation for a lot of trans and non-binary students as hearing or seeing their dead-name can cause a lot of gender dysphoria and will have a huge negative impact on their mental health. To combat this, there needs to be a system in place for each college during their registration that students should be able to set their own name and gender that they would like to have on the college's system and on their student ID.

Asks & Recommendations

- » To have a system in place that students can change their name and gender when they enter third level education.

Disabled Artists & Disabled Academics (DADA)

The additional annual cost of living with a disability is between €8,700-€12,300 a year. Yet, the Blind Pension/Disability Allowance/Invalidity Pension is €208 a week, which is reduced with earnings assessed as over €140 a week.

Administrative anomalies inconsistent with self-employment

The time frame of disability social welfare audits does not coincide with Revenue's annual assessment, and the criteria of assessment also differ. This brings about inaccurate assessment, resulting in an unfair adjustment of supports.

Ask: Change regulations to support self-employment in practice by ceasing Social Protection reviews which are out of sync with Revenue's annual pay and file. Replace with that self-employed disabled people simply send their annual revenue assessment to the Blind Pension/Disability Allowance/Invalidity Pension.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Remove the mandatory 3 month change of income reporting to Blind Pension/Disability Allowance for self-employed people and replace with annual return of revenue assessment. This would be consistent with supporting self-employment

Remove anomalies that discriminate against certain disabilities

Remove anomalies within disability supports which cause discrimination between disabilities in Self Employment. Blind Pension is taxable, disability Allowance is not. Because of this, blind and visually impaired artists are required to register as self-employed with much additional incomes as low as €6,000.

Asks & Recommendations

- » For the blind pension to no longer be taxable like the disability allowance
- » The savings threshold for recipients of the blind pension is increased to the same level as the disability allowance

Gaeilge

Tréimhse Foghlama sa Ghaeltacht

In Budget 2020 the grant for the mandatory 'Tréimhse Foghlama sa Ghaeltacht' was re-instated for student teachers in all public colleges, paid by the Department of Education and Skills. We are asking for the grant to be extended to those in Private Teaching Colleges such as Hibernia College and that travel costs to and from the Gaeltacht are covered for all students, as currently only students who avail of the SUSI grant are entitled to this.

On average it costs over €700 for a two week stay in the Gaeltacht for student teachers in private colleges, of which they are required to spend four weeks in the Gaeltacht.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Implementation of full state funding for the Mandatory 'Tréimhse Foghlama sa Ghaeltacht' for all student teachers, including those in private colleges.
- » Estimated Cost: €2.8 million

Use of the Irish Language for Student Unions'

Currently there is no funding available for the promotion of the Irish Language for Student Unions and others under the HEI. However, there is a scheme in place for the promotion of some foreign languages for those who provide Foreign Language courses. The introduction of such scheme for the Irish Language would prove crucial to strengthening the language across all campuses.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Development of a scheme to be set up for Student Unions' and others under the HEI to be able to avail of funding for the promotion and use of the Irish Language on campuses through the HEA.
- » Increased funding for Scholarships to the Gaeltacht for all third-level students, including those who are not studying Irish.

Gaeltacht Scholarships

Many students do not get the opportunity to attend courses in the Gaeltacht due to the cost and therefore miss out on a valuable opportunity to get immersed in the language and culture of the Gaeltacht. While some scholarships are available, they are limited to

On average it costs over €700 for a two week stay in the Gaeltacht for student teachers in private colleges and over €1,000 to send your child to the Gaeltacht for a 2-week course. Students cannot afford such high costs.

certain cohorts of students and the majority of them are aimed at students under 18 years of age.

We are asking the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to establish a fund aimed at supporting third-level students who wish to attend courses in the Gaeltacht. On average it costs over €700 for a two week stay in the Gaeltacht for student teachers in private colleges and over €1,000 to send your child to the Gaeltacht for a 2-week course. Students cannot afford such high costs. Increased funding will encourage more students to get immersed in our native language and fulfill their desire to spend time in the Gaeltacht.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Increased funding for Scholarships to the Gaeltacht for all third-level students, including those not studying Irish.

Increased investment into courses ran through the medium of the Irish Language for students to avail of.

Despite €1,142 million being allocated in Gross Funding to the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media in Budget 2023, only €21 million of that was directly aimed at the Irish Language, with a further €7.3million being allocated to TG4.

The Irish Language has received the least amount of funding in recent years within the department. It is proving more costly for courses ran through the medium of the Irish Language, which turns

Gaeilge

students off applying, despite the demand being there. Currently only 1% of students are doing third-level courses through Irish, half of which are teaching courses. It is recommended that this figure be increased to 5% if we have any chance of reaching our ‘*Stráitéis 20 bliain don Ghaeilge 2010-2030*’ targets. If increased, it will encourage more students to apply for such courses.

Asks & Recommendations

» Increased investment in courses run through the medium of the Irish Language for students to avail of.

Investment for courses to have a minimum of one module taught through Irish across all third level education.

Under Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla’s ‘*Stráitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge 2010-2030*’ it outlines targets to set aside 20% of college places for those who get their primary and secondary school education through Irish, either in the Gaeltacht or in Gaelscoileanna. This encourages students to continue their education through Irish and ensure supports are made available for the HEA to help develop a plan for Irish in third-level education, especially for courses involving teaching. This in turn, will help achieve the ‘*Stráitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge 2010-2030*’ goal of having 20% of new recruits in public service fluent in Irish by getting third-level students educated through Irish.

Asks & Recommendations

» Investment for courses to have a minimum of one module taught through Irish in all third level education.

Increased Funding for Raidió Rí Rá to get on FM

Raidió Rí Rá is run entirely through Irish and is aimed towards young people by playing chart music. While they do get opportunities to be on FM in certain counties during Seachtain na Gaeilge, Radió Rí Rá is currently only available online through their website, through their app or through the TuneIn app.

Asks & Recommendations

» Increased Funding for Raidió Rí Rá to get on FM

Research and Innovation

The issues of postgraduate student supports are imperative for Improving access to postgraduate education and ensuring that researchers are adequately treated during their time in university.

While some factors leading to issues of accessing a postgraduate degree may be like such issues seen at an undergraduate level, there are specific factors that would impede someone's ability to access a postgraduate education. Adequate stipend rates and wider measures ensuring employment rights for postgraduate researchers are imperative to allow a wider access to postgraduate education.

Asks & Recommendations

- » The Introduction of a minimum PhD stipend rate in line with the outcomes of the Independent Report on Supports for PhD Researchers in Ireland at a minimum of €25,000. this equates to a cost of €75 million.
- » The introduction of contractual terms through statute to guarantee maternity, paternity, and adequate sick leaves for PhD programs.
- » Increase in the number of seats for Government of Ireland – International Education Scholarship (GOI-IES) program for both taught and research-based master programmes.
- » Postgraduate Funding

The funding model for postgraduate candidates in Ireland sees students financing their education in four ways; agency stipends awarded through competitive funding agencies such as the Irish Research Council (IRC) and the Science Foundation of Ireland (SFI), institutional scholarship from the host HEI, fee waivers or contributions, or through remuneration for academic work assigned to the candidate.

The National Review of State Supports for Postgraduate Researchers extensively deals with the issue of PhD stipends and USI echoes their recommendations here.

Additionally, as mentioned in the access to education section of this submission, the issue of stipends is one that ensures access to

postgraduate education, but it only forms one part of that effort. Scholarships and grants to cover the fees associated with a postgraduate education are often short of the true amount of fees need. The disparity between Postgraduate Researchers (PGR) fees and the major state-funded research awards (IRC Gov of Ireland, IRC Enterprise and SFI awards). Currently IRC and SFI cover up to €5750 in fees but for most people, fees are in excess of €5750. This means the shortfall is made up by the PGR's school/departmental funds or by the PGR personally. Often when fees are covered by schools/departments, the amount is taken from the PGR stipend or made up for through unpaid teaching, this is not acceptable and ending it is a matter of urgency.

Asks & Recommendations

- » Increased funding to the IRC and IFR to remove the cap on scholarships as to cover the full tuition of the candidate - €45 million.
- » Increasing the postgraduate maintenance grant rates to the same level as the support for undergraduate students across all bands. Full year: €3.9m// 2024 Cost: €1.72
- » Increasing the income threshold for the special rate to €50k and removing provision setting out the requirement of receiving relief from the Department of Social Protection.
- » Increasing the maximum amount available for postgraduate tuition grant by 56% to become €6,271 per year. Full year cost: €4.1m// 2024 Cost: €3.88m.

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USI

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Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn

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