



TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN STUDENTS' UNION

FOREWORD



Dear Chair and members of the Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you today. I am speaking on behalf of the 17,000 students I represent in Trinity, but also as a student who graduated last week, having undergone a four year course. I was lucky to have received the SUSI grant for each of those years, and have two parents who supported me.

You have a defining decision ahead of you. Students spend, on the whole, between 10 and 12 thousand euro a year on college according to a DIT Cost of Living Survey. I have had students come to my office every week asking for help, financial support, and in some cases food to get by. Accommodation costs rise and finding suitable accommodation remains difficult. The cost of living, too, rises. These students – the ones who have to work 2 to 3 part-time jobs, who have to barely get by on the SUSI money – are very dependent on the outcome of this committee's review. Our students in our Union stand for no fee increases and this is what I am asking you for today.

Students as a whole are greatly concerned about the proposals of the July Cassells report - you saw this at the USI rally in October, when close to 2000 Trinity students - a record- marched on the streets of Dublin. The report rightly outlines that more investment is needed now into higher-level education. This should not be a gradual increase- as Peter Cassells stated to you, the system is broken and needs a revamp. Staff-student ratios are unacceptable and universities are now coming to the end of their reserves, not to mention the desperate state ITs find themselves in. The rankings will continue to slide if a decision is not made.

Students are concerned about the ramifications some of the options outlined would leave them with. Student fees increased in recessionary times from 1500 to 3000 euro. This report in part outlines how they could increase again, to 4000 or 5000 euro, to say nothing of interest rates or cuts to grants. In a time of recovery, this is most unfair and a retrograde step for our country to take. Make no mistake, an income contingent loan scheme of 4000-5000 euro is an increase in fees, and will be seen as one.

While I know that this system is not the same as the UK or US, the countries where loans may be seen as a moderate success still have many pitfalls.

Australia has tinkered with its system many times. It has charged more money for specific courses such as medicine and law. Indeed, the system may even be left behind by the current government. Youth Allowance (their version of SUSI) recipients are more likely to borrow from family and friends, as well as others, and go without educational books and materials than other university students. They are also less likely to believe they are managing well financially and are less satisfied with their financial position. Geoff Maslen of Universities Australia stated that: 'Not only will they have spent those years struggling to survive on incomes below the poverty line, they will have generated debts that could keep them impoverished for years.' One in five loans there are not paid back and there is, similar to here, much emigration. Loans tend to rise, they tend to scare off students, particularly mature and part-time students, and they tend more and more to not be paid back. 40 of every 100 pounds given to loans are not paid back currently in the UK. The IOT presidents spoke passionately

about maintaining access routes in their call for free education. It's been a point thrown at the previous 'free fees' scheme that it did not improve access. A loan system will impede it. It is not just financial barriers that impede access and indeed we have noted our recommendations for improving access in the report before you. If a proposed scheme will at the worst severely curtail access and at its best keep access rates the same, as the loan system will do, why are we pursuing it?

The Report outlines that SUSI should be maintained and enhanced. I would agree- living costs need to be covered more than they are currently. I cannot see the State agreeing to this whilst simultaneously borrowing for a loan scheme. Grants and supports would not remain safe under the loan system, and this again would rise the cost of college.

I don't want to just discuss the loan option, as much of the political and media attention has focused on it. There are, after all, two other options. I believe my colleague Annie will outline the arguments for a publicly-funded education scheme. I would ask that it not be dismissed. Our report outlines how such schemes work in Europe- not just in Scandinavia. Option 2 has not been discussed much either. It, too, should be examined and models should be created - not just models for the loan option.

But I want to bring answers and solutions to you too. Cassells speaks of increasing the employers' contribution. 'This should be delivered by increasing the National Training Fund levy', it states. Each 0.1% increase in the levy could raise at least an additional €50m per annum. If we raised this by half a percent, or even 1 percent, that would go a long long way. There needs to be a balance, and employers are categorically not playing their part. The word talent is used to describe Ireland's workforce to the world. There is a complete benefit for companies in contributing to higher education, and they need to do so more. This committee has asked for advice several times on how to 'sell' the option picked for higher education. This is a very easy way of selling it- increase the employer's contribution only slightly and ringfence it for higher education.

Thank you for listening to me this morning. I would be very grateful if you read our report, which was written and compiled by students. We are happy to come back and present or comment at any stage. This is a time to decide what we as a country stand for in looking towards the future. We need to decide if education is a public good. This decision will affect us and the students who come after us most of all. We are your teachers, mechanics, engineers, researchers, lawyers, doctors, therapists, nurses, even senators. We are the future of this country and we deserve the best future that our country can give. We will play our part - we would ask our employers and politicians to do the same.