

Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills (08/12/2016)

Annie Hoey – President of the Union of Students in Ireland (USI)

Today, I sit before you as the voice of 354,000 students from across the island of Ireland who are calling on this Committee to make the brave decision and introduce a publicly funded higher education system. I am here as the spokesperson for students, staff and teachers who formed the Coalition for Publicly Funded Higher Education. This Coalition has the support of 1.9 million people to date, and we are firmly united in our call for publicly funded higher education.

I have attended the past two presentations made to this Committee on the future funding of higher education, and I am well aware that access is of great concern to everyone. But this focus on access has become too narrow. 'Access' in higher education should not just be about getting into college, but getting on and getting beyond. As you will see in our supplementary paper, key targets of the National Access Plan -- lone parents, part-time learners, those with a disability, adults outside of the education system and those from lower income families -- will all be adversely affected by increased fees and an income contingent loan scheme. There is also emerging evidence to indicate long-term effects of an income contingent loan scheme on future "adult" milestones, such as accessing further credit, home ownership and mortgages. We must choose a funding option that sees a fair access to a better standard of living, free from financial burden and free from debt.

Far from being a radical idea, higher education systems mostly funded from public sources are actually the norm in Europe, while fully-free public education exists in many strong and competitive economies, such as the Nordics, Scotland and Germany.

Universities are publicly-funded in Germany, with 12 German universities in the 14/15 Times Higher Education World University Rankings, up from 10 the

year before. Despite the fact that Ireland has the second highest fees in Europe, and with the eighth highest fees in the world, Ireland has dropped down in the same rankings.

In Germany, many vocational programmes are provided through a dual programme of training and education. This dual system allows for a developed, responsive and flexible system where people are not siloed into higher education but are provided with more pathways and access to a better standard of living that suits students and their needs. For young people from the EU, the chances of securing an apprenticeship in Germany have improved in recent years. For the first time, the number of people entering higher education matched that of people enrolling in programmes in vocational training.

If we reimagine our higher education landscape by taking inspiration from the German vocational and apprenticeship models, we reduce the pressure on our universities and IoTs. By providing alternative pathways for post-secondary level education, participation is more fruitful, and retention is improved for all. While considering how we will fund higher education, we should consider what ambitions we have for diversifying educational options. The current Minister for Education and Skills has often reiterated his ambitions for apprenticeships and training, so USI would encourage the Committee to delve deeper into funding models like Germany before making a decision.

People should be educated based on their ability, needs and wants, rather than on the wealth of their parents or their potential future earnings.

Education is the most important investment any government can make in ensuring sustainable growth of the economy in the future. Higher education transforms society, enhances competitiveness, and strengthens the economy. In most European countries, publicly funded or incredibly low fees are the norm, because education at every level is considered an intrinsic part of the social citizenship model.

There is public support in favour of publicly funded higher education. Out of 92,000 people who used our SmartVote webapp last February, 57.3% agreed that third level education should be funded through general taxation. So despite what the Cassells Report outlines as a reason why a publicly funded model is too ambitious, public opinion actually does agree that it is fair and balanced to fund higher education through public taxation.

As you can see from our attached report, students are suffering and the status quo cannot continue. It is also clear that increased fees are not fair, palpable or a practicable option, with or without an income contingent loan scheme. Others who argue against a publicly-funded higher education model declare it is not feasible. Then we must ask ourselves - if this option is not viable for our society then why would the expert group include this as an option to begin with? To not choose a publicly-funded higher education system is just that - a choice. A choice that will be made by this Committee. I hope this committee will hear the thousands of people who are joining me in my call for a publicly funded higher education system.