



**Opening Remarks on the Future Funding of Higher Education to the Joint Committee on Education,
Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science [5 minutes]**

A chairde,

Firstly, I would like to thank the Chairperson and members of the Joint Committee for this opportunity today. My name is Clare Austick and I am the President of the Union of Students in Ireland. USI is the national student representative body for over 374,000 students in third level education across the Island of Ireland. Our core mission has always been to protect access to third level education.

USI firmly believes that access to higher education is a right and not a privilege. However, the continues marketization of education has only served to heighten existing barriers to third level education. The Student Contribution Charge coupled with the cost of accommodation and living prevents far too many students from availing of a third level degree. The current SUSI grant is not fit for purpose and needs adequate investment to meaningfully support students through college. In addition, the higher education sector is extremely underfunded and needs significant core funding allocated annually.

Future Funding Model for Higher Education

The USI strongly advocates for an immediate reduction in the Student Contribution Charge and for a publicly-funded higher education system. Higher Education Institutions should not have to rely so heavily on private sources of income. The state should be responsible for funding the system to the levels required to ensure high quality education for all students.

At present, Irish university funding consists of approximately 50% private funding. This is the highest in the European Union (EU) and second highest in Europe. According to the OECD, Ireland invests just 0.8% of GDP in tertiary education which is well below the 1.5% OECD average. ([Education at a Glance, OECD](#)).

the current student staff ratio in Ireland is among the highest in the EU and a minimum investment of €147.48M per annum is required to bring Irish HEI's in line with international best practice of 15:1.

The USI believes strongly that publicly funded education is the most equitable way to ensure that this increased funding is delivered. The onus should not be on existing/future students, rather the state should commit to supporting the future workforce of the country.

Increase in funding through a publicly funded education system as outlined in the Cassell's Report would allow for HEI's to make much needed improvements to facilities and resources and would ensure that student support services are in line with best practice guidelines. The capital funding outlined would allow HEI's to access grants to build affordable purpose-built student accommodation, which is in huge demand as outlined by the 2017 Student Accommodation Strategy.

Future Expansion of the Technological Universities

The further expansion of TU's pose logistical challenges. As Institutes of Technologies across different geographical locations merge, investment in public transport links is required. USI believes it important that the government addresses the lack of public transport infrastructure, in the rural areas particularly.

Finally, IT's have long been prohibited from certain borrowing and banking practices. It's important a wider breadth of options are made available to TU's to allow for growth and, furthermore, construction of affordable, purpose-built student accommodation.

Access, Diversity and Inclusion to include Digital Learning and Student Grant Support

Universal Design Learning

Universal Design for Learning played a critical role in online assessment and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, outside the COVID classroom, UDL serves as an important tool to help combat barriers that students with disabilities may face in both learning and social environments. UDL is critical in increasing awareness of barriers to participation and supports that a student may need.

Therefore, it is important to provide trainings and draft protocols that implement UDL principles. Including, but not limited to, trainings on disability awareness, provision of reasonable accommodations in remote and in-person environments, lecture recordings and documents in alternative formats (sign language, closed captions, word format).

Student Grant Scheme/ Student Universal Support Ireland

Equity of access to higher education is a core component of the work of the USI. Existing support structures are not optimal and there have been significant cuts to the SUSI grant over the last decade. USI believes that the Student Grant Scheme is a huge opportunity to support students to access education and progress in their learning journey.

It is important to note the knock-on effect of a stagnant student grant scheme, deaf to inflation and higher costs of living. It affects many things such as disadvantaged & low-income families, engaging in part time or full-time employment which may lead to students being unable to complete their studies satisfactorily. Addressing the issue of course continuation due to financial difficulty or full-time/part-time work should be acknowledged if there is data to support it.

International Student Financial Support

International students face one of the biggest financial barriers when it comes to third-level education in Ireland. Often time this leaves them feeling exploited. International students should have access to financial supports within the grant scheme in Ireland.

Students who have not lived in Ireland or another EU member state for 3 of the last 5 years do not qualify for EU tuition fee levels or the student maintenance grant, regardless of their nationality and/or citizenship.

Disadvantaged groups like migrants, asylum seekers, those living in Direct Provision and undocumented migrants can't access education support through the current student grant scheme.

Furthermore, International students cannot access the Student Assistance Fund SAF. USI implores the government to adopt a more considerate approach towards international students. Seeing them as people rather than cash cows.

Life-Long Learning, Progression Pathways and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) to support staff

USI acknowledges the crucial role of ancillary staff in HE institutions. USI also acknowledges that education systems are rapidly evolving with increasing student numbers, wider student demographics and increasing use of technology. Therefore, it is important that support staff are equipped to adapt to these changes and continue to thrive professionally. Funds invested into upskilling opportunities are returned two-fold in terms of staff morale, passion and output. Furthermore, it is students that will ultimately reap the benefits of a work environment that fosters innovation, training and development. USI also emphasises that a valued, fulfilled workforce is a productive one and return-on-investment.

On another note, USI wishes to point to the tireless work of Students' Union officers in supporting students nationally, also noting the officers occupy sabbatical positions with one-

year terms. USI would like to see funding allocated to Student Union development and progression pathways for retired officers.

Research, Innovation and Engagement

Postgraduate Funding

A national stipend in line with the living wage for research postgraduates would enhance engagement in research and encourage the involvement of more postgraduate researchers of diverse backgrounds. The disparity in stipends across HEIs is essential to note, where some postgraduate students are earning less than beneficiaries receiving social welfare. This extends completion rates and affects students' completion of the research at all. Ireland agreed to improve gender equality as one of its' priorities with the European Research Area policy framework, statutory maternity cover available to postgraduate researchers would support this initiative.

Postgraduate Teaching

Postgraduates should be fairly paid for working hours they do within their institution.

Health and Wellbeing Supports

Mental Health

USI believes that positive student mental health and wellbeing is a fundamental element to the overall student experience. Worryingly, student mental health has been worsening over the years, particularly with many students struggling through the COVID-19 pandemic. Professional mental health supports are crucial in supporting students through college. On-campus student mental health services are under-resourced and underfunded, resulting in long waiting lists. The Government needs to invest in student mental health and wellbeing as research shows that supporting student mental health can improve academic performance, retention, and graduation rates.

Students with mental health problems were twice as likely to leave higher education without graduating. USI believes there is a need for a whole campus approach to supporting student mental health which involves collaboration between support services and key stakeholders within the institution. USI strongly advocates for the recommendations of the Student Mental Health & Suicide Prevention Framework to be adopted. USI believes cross collaboration between counselling services, disability services, health units, GP's, mental health nurses, psychiatrists, lecturing staff who are trained in mental health awareness and wellbeing coordinators, both on and off campus. USI strongly advocates for the recommendations of the Student Mental Health & Suicide Prevention Framework to be adopted.

Wellbeing Supports

Wellbeing supports are crucial in shaping the student experience and supporting their journey through college. There is a need to invest into more wellbeing supports such as Counselling Services, Disability Support Services, mental health nurses, wellbeing initiatives and wellbeing coordinators. Targeted initiatives to support consent education and drug harm

reduction are equally as important.