

**Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research,
Innovation and Science**

1 June 2022

Minister Harris Opening Statement

Introduction

- At the turn of the year, there were few here among us that would have predicted that war would once again plague Europe and that we would be coping with the biggest displacement of people on the continent since the dark days of World War Two.
- The Government has been unequivocal in its welcome for people fleeing Ukraine, and of its determination to deliver on its obligations to support access to education, social income and housing.
- Of course, this is challenging, but we are not just legally obliged to response – more importantly, we are morally required to do the right thing.
- I am proud to see that this approach is widely reflected throughout our society and in the education sector.
- We also stand united with our fellow EU Members States in our condemnation of and revulsion at Putin's war in Ukraine.
- On 18 March, alongside our European partners, I signed a statement on behalf of Ireland condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The key aim of this statement was to signal support for higher education students and staff in Ukraine and to suspend Russia's rights of representation on all structures and activities of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).
- In March, I asked Commissioner Mariya Gabriel, who has responsibility for Innovation, Research, Culture, Education and Youth to convene a special Education Council meeting to a common approach and response across all Member States.

- I am glad this meeting took place, and it allowed for a very clear message to be sent to Russia that EU Ministers were united in their stance on Russia's illegal, immoral and unjustified war.
- The Ukrainian Minister also took part in that meeting, and the picture of destruction of education infrastructure in the Ukraine is a further imperative for me to respond as generously as possible to the plight of Ukrainian students.
- Sadly the numbers fleeing the destruction and violence visited on their homeland continue to grow, and facilitating the significant numbers of people arriving is challenging, not least for the education sector. I would like to record my appreciation for all throughout this period.
- The Irish Higher Education sector has been open and generous in their response to the crisis and they have worked constructively with my Department to facilitate the further studies of those arriving from Ukraine.

Supports for qualified persons under Section 60 of International Protection Act 2015

- In line with the European Council Decision of 4 March, the Government has committed to ensuring access the labour market and education to qualified persons on the same basis as citizens of Ireland.
- My officials have written to the IUA and THEA confirming qualified persons should be treated as Irish students in terms of fees.
- Furthermore, my officials are currently examining how these students may be further supported, including financially, in order to facilitate their continuing education in Ireland.
- I plan to bring a Memorandum to Government to agree additional supports for qualified persons within the next few weeks. I am happy to share some initial proposals with colleagues but this will confirm Ukrainian students will not pay international fees. We will provide student supports too, which will match the SUSI scheme.
- This memo will also ensure that displaced Ukrainians can access PLCs for free.

- And crucially, additional funds will be for Mental Health Services to ensure adequate services are available to Ukrainian Students.
- This will be considered by Government shortly and I am happy to share more details when I update Cabinet.

National Student and Researcher Helpdesk

- Colleagues, you may also know I have established the **National Student and Researcher Helpdesk**, which has been operational since last month.
- It is a single point of contact for all displaced students who are seeking to access higher education, and will guide applicants through the documentation required to support their continued access to higher education. The Helpdesk will then be able to direct students to a local college equipped to meet their educational needs.
- In agreeing to fund this helpdesk, I know that it is staffed by Admissions and Research Advisors, who are very well placed to give the best advice to students and researchers arriving from Ukraine.
- Since its establishment, it has dealt with over 500 queries, and this number is expected to grow significantly over the summer months.
- I really encourage colleagues here who are receiving calls or questions to please direct individuals here. I am happy to share details with the committee.

English Language Training

- I want to turn to one of the bigger challenges we are facing in this Department.
- Access to English language supports is essential to people arriving from Ukraine.
- The 16 Education and Training Boards are offering English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses cross the country in response to demand presenting locally. I am happy to share details with colleagues of each ETB contact person.

- Ukrainians wishing to learn English or improve their English can contact their local ETB for an assessment of their English language competency in reading, writing, speaking and listening. The ETBs will identify appropriate language and additional learning supports to support Ukrainians wishing to develop their English language competency as part of their social, economic and cultural integration into local and wider Irish society. Information leaflets in both Ukrainian and Russian covering language provision and the FET system in Ireland more generally are available on gov.ie and will be circulated to Intreo offices as required. The service is free.
- In some ETBs, such as Kerry ETB and Limerick-Clare ETB, ESOL provision is being delivered on an outreach basis in the centres where Ukrainians are being accommodated. This has the benefit of enabling their participation around childcare in a familiar setting but also has the function of providing information and orientation, not only in terms of their education and training options but also in accessing local services and supports. This illustrates a strong, flexible model which has been devised by ETBs in response to the situation.
- The ETBs are also exploring the possibility of CPD courses over the summer in order to upskill or retrain Ukrainian teachers to provide tutoring services. They are reviewing the possible use of e-college for this provision. Following a survey of ETB staff training needs, ETBI ran a webinar for ETB staff in May on the topic of Psychological First Aid, to help equip staff in dealing with learners who may be presenting with trauma.
- Of course the level of English Language competency required to participate in Higher Education is different to that provided by the ETBs.
- With that in mind, a working group comprising on representatives from the Higher Education sector has been established to support the acquisition of English language competency for academic purposes. Proposals designed to support Ukrainian students for the coming academic year, will be submitted to the Department imminently.

Ukraine Higher Entrance Exam

- In my interaction with Ukrainian officials it has always been clear to me that Ukraine is keen to maintain its connection with its student population. To help maintain this link Ireland has committed to hosting sessions of this year's Ukrainian Higher Education Entrance Exams.
- There will be three exams - one exam for entrance into higher education, the national multi-subject test (NMT) and two entrance exams for Masters level, the Masters Test for Educational Competence (METC) for admission into master's degrees and the Master's Comprehensive Test (MCT) for admission into a speciality subjects.
- The exams will be taken online in a dedicated testing centre and my officials are working with the IUA and THEA to source the necessary staff, testing centres and equipment. As of 30 May, DFHERIS has been made aware of 229 students who wish to take the undergraduate test **in July**.

Qualification Recognition

- There is an ongoing commitment to provide every support possible for Ukrainian citizens who are seeking the recognition of their qualifications in Ireland be it to further their education, to pursue employment opportunities, or to practice a profession that is regulated.
- My Department is responsible for the implementation of the EU Directive on Professional Qualifications, and in that regard provides critical support to the work of the appropriate Competent Authorities by sharing best practice material supplied by the European Commission. This includes working with and supporting these Authorities as they implement the recently published Commission Recommendation on the recognition of qualifications for people fleeing Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This Recommendation provides Authorities with guidance and practical advice to ensure a quick, fair and flexible recognition process for Ukrainian refugees.

- As a profession is regulated, such as the professions of doctor, nurse or teacher for example, the decision to recognise qualifications rests with the relevant national Regulator or Competent Authority.
- For example, if a person wishes to be a doctor, they will have to engage with the Medical Council.
- In such cases, the Irish Medical Council assesses foreign qualifications against the established Irish regulatory standard to ensure the holder has the specialised skills and competencies that are required to practice medicine in Ireland.
- To put this in context, Ireland has over 45 such Authorities covering a wide range of professions – from surgeons to security door personnel. Many of these Authorities have already reached out to engage with the Ukrainian community and have published dedicated material on their websites to assist Ukrainians who are now seeking to practice in Ireland. The full list of these Competent Authorities is published on my Department's website, and again I am happy to share the details with the Committee.
- My Department is continuing to work with our national Competent Authorities, their parent Departments, the European Commission and other Member States on this issue.
- Through NARIC Ireland, a service hosted and operated by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), advice can be readily obtained on the academic recognition of foreign qualifications. This service compares foreign qualifications to major award types and levels on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), which sets these foreign qualifications clearly into an Irish context.
- The advice provided by NARIC Ireland helps to inform employers if an applicant holds the academic qualifications necessary for a particular job or employment opportunity.
- This service is free of charge, fully online, and has been made available in a wide range of languages spoken by Ukrainians.

- In addition, SOLAS has scheduled the first of two Ukrainian Language Safe Pass programmes, with an approved Ukrainian interpreter used to help with delivery. 14 people have been granted a SafePass to date. Safepass is provided through a wide range of languages including Russian & German. Ukrainian citizens can attend a Safe Pass or CSCS\QSCS programme in a wide variety of languages.

Irish Medical Students in Ukraine

- I want to quickly turn to two final issues, Chair. Among those fleeing the war in Ukraine are a group of 60 Irish medical and dental students who were forced to abandon their studies in Ukraine to preserve their safety.
- My officials have been liaising with the Deans of the Medical schools in Ireland who are currently undertaking an assessment of the programmes in the Medical Schools in the Ukraine.
- A key element of this process isto understand the alignment of the Ukrainian programme with the Irish system of medical and dentistry education, along with other issues arising regarding accreditation by the professional bodies. This exercise will then allow us to see how best we can facilitate those fleeing the war to continue their studies in Ireland.
- In tandem with this, my officials have maintained regular contact with the students, keeping them informed of the different steps in this process, mostly recently last Friday.
- The field of medical education is highly complex and it is vital that we maintain our enviable reputation for medical expertise. My Officials have kept in touch with the students, and I expect that the Deans will complete this process in the coming weeks.

Student Accommodation

- And finally, we are all aware of the housing challenges we face and the influx of displaced people from the war zone has not made this task any easier. Officials continue to engage with the Irish Universities Association (IUA), and the Education Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) in relation to the possible use of student accommodation for surge accommodation during the summer months. IUA have recently shared information on approximately 2,000 potential bed spaces in student accommodation available outside of term time.

- This information has been shared with Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) who are leading on the provision of emergency accommodation.
- I have to make it very clear. This is a temporary measure. Students need accommodation from late August.
- However, I hope this will help ensure there is some breathing space while medium to long term solutions are provided.

Conclusion

- The situation in Ukraine is having profound effects across Europe in all areas of life, as we seek to accommodate the millions displaced by the war.
- Ukrainians are a proud people and in my engagements with the Ukrainian Embassy, and those I have met throughout the country, they have been united in their determination to return to and rebuild their homeland as soon as they are able to.
- In the meantime, I restate our moral obligation to stand in solidarity with them in the face of unwarranted aggression and violence that has been brought to their door by the actions of the Russian dictator.
- I would also like to acknowledge the comprehensive and enthusiastic engagement of both the Further and Higher Education sectors with my Department in seeking how best facilitate those fleeing the war.
- Every sector of Irish society is playing its part. Our priorities in our education systems have to be, to welcome, support and meet the needs of the students, teachers and researchers who are displaced.
- I look forward to taking your questions and observations – thank you.