



An Roinn Breisoideachais agus Ardoideachais,  
Taighde, Nuálaíochta agus Eolaíochta  
Department of Further and Higher Education,  
Research, Innovation and Science

## **Meeting of the Joint Committee on Education, Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science**

**Thursday, 24th January 2023 at 5.30 pm**

**Committee Room 4, LH2000, Leinster House**

### **Opening Statement**

Chair, committee members many thanks for the invitation here today.

I know the committee is seeking to cover a range of topics but I thought it might be useful to reflect on the progress the Department has made since we met in June last.

In Budget 2024, we secured a significant cost of education package for third level students.

This included a €1,000 reduction in the contribution fee, increases in the student grant scheme, and a re-introduction of post-graduate supports for the first time since the economic crash.

Since the start of this year, student grants have increased by up to €342 this academic year. That is an additional €342 in the pockets of students between January and May.

Postgraduate maintenance grants will return on a similar basis to undergraduates for the first time since the economic crash putting up to €2,384 back in the pockets of postgraduate students.

One of the changes announced on Budget day that I think will be most transformative for our education system is that for the first time ever, the student grant scheme will be extended to part-time students in respect of fees.

This will mean for any eligible student on qualifying programmes earning less than €55,924, a grant in respect of fees will be available.

This, I believe, is really significant. It will be a helping hand for a lone parent, or a person with a disability who cannot access full-time education.

I know the committee is united behind this work and I would like to work with members to establish how this progresses over the coming years.

In addition to this, we have increased funding to both our higher education and further education sectors.

This includes €60 million to address the core funding challenge our universities are facing and €67 million to invest in our apprenticeship system.

Since we last met, we have also progressed significant student accommodation projects and policy objectives with the support of Government.

Minister Donohoe, Minister O'Brien and I launched the policy paper on Student accommodation in DCU last Friday.

This is a significant policy change in the area of student accommodation.

The last Student Accommodation Strategy relied on the private market to build accommodation, but this strategy switches the dial.

For the first time, the State will invest in the construction of student housing – in and near college campuses.

Our first priority is activating projects with planning permission and we have had some success here.

Two projects have now gone to tender with 521 beds across Dublin City University and Maynooth. Both will go to construction this year.

The Government gave my Department approval to advance plans to construct a further 2,500 beds across UCD, Trinity and more in DCU.

Funding will be sought through the NDP review, which has already commenced.

The next phase is even more exciting and that is to advance plans to construct student accommodation in our Technological Universities.

I know I do not need to stress to the committee members how important this is and can be – to the success of our TUs, but also to regional development and to ensuring people can study, work and raise a family where they wish.

That work starts this week with correspondence to issue from my Department to the TUs outlining the next steps. A call for proposals will then issue and will be assessed shortly thereafter.

We are also pursuing long-term policy change, which Government approved last week. It looks at a number of key areas:

- To introduce standardised design to ensure accommodation is built without the frills students don't want or do not wish to pay for;
- promotion of digs accommodation through the rent a room scheme and through prioritisation by the Universities
- and repurposing of appropriate vacant building stock to provide additional student accommodation;

- and critically improving access to public transport with some exciting proposals emerging about bike to college schemes

The policy will inform the development of the new Student Accommodation Strategy and associated schemes which will be further developed in 2024 in consultation with Government colleagues and stakeholders.

Building more student specific housing will free up capacity in the wider rental market and help our overall housing supply.

I know there are other areas the committee wishes to discuss so I will do my best to get through them all.

On the work of the committee on North South enrolment and I really want to praise the work of the committee in advancing this work.

I am really pleased to confirm Universities Ireland has completed its work.

Under the leadership of Professor Pól Ó Dochartaigh, it has recommended significant and important changes.

As you are aware, the biggest issue in terms of movement from North to South are the Leaving Certificate – A-Level equivalencies.

The current situation states it is only possible to achieve the maximum 625 points by taking four A-Levels and one of them has to be Maths.

Colleagues will know I recently launched an ESRI report, which found this disadvantages A Level candidates and is a major contributing factor to the low student mobility from North to South.

Universities Ireland have recommended that A-Level candidates be allowed to use the best three A Levels, in combination with a fourth A Level or an AS Level or an extended project.

Or with two A-Levels and two AS Levels.

This means applicants can attain a score of 600 points on the basis of these two scenarios, or 625 points if one of the A Levels is Maths.

For those who are not familiar with the system, this essentially means it will be easier for students from Northern Ireland to access education here in Ireland.

There are other issues that we need to work on but I believe this is a very good step. My thanks to Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh, who is chair of the Universities Ireland for driving this project.

There is some good progress to report. It is expected a number of universities will implement this from September. A number of others have chosen to wait until 2025.

I think it is really important clarity is given to students early on and I hope institutions will outline their positions shortly.

My Department has also sought to progress work to secure places for Irish students in medical schools in Northern Ireland.

Under the approach, students would be eligible to apply for an internship in the HSE on graduation.

My officials have been working closely with the institutions in the North and the Departments of Health and Economy, Northern Ireland over the last 18 months, to develop a proposal which would lead to more medical places for Irish students in the North and increase the pool of Irish medical graduates, educated on the island who would be eligible to apply to work in the HSE.

The final details of the proposal are still being worked through. And I expect to be in a position to make further announcements within a few weeks.

I know the committee also wishes to discuss the ongoing work to increase healthcare and veterinary places across higher education.

Colleagues know over the past two years, we have increased the number of medicine places for EU students by 120, the number of nursing places by 290 and the number of places in key therapies by 273.

But we know there is much more to do and we have a list of options to consider.

Not all can proceed at the same time but we do want to do all of these healthcare options.

Because quite often when we discuss workforce planning, we do forget to consider the needs of our own public service.

Working with colleagues in the Department of Health, we are working to progress these projects.

We are also working with the Department of Agriculture and I really want to thank Minister Mc Conalogue.

We had an excellent meeting recently and we are determined to work together to increase veterinary provision in Ireland.

Detailed discussions are taking place about the ways and means to address capital costs for the provision of any new school in these areas, including in the context of an expected upcoming review of Departmental National Development Plan allocations.

There are other areas of interest I know the Committee wishes to discuss today, including STEM, capital and the area of apprenticeships.



On the area of apprenticeships, we have published the Public Sector Apprenticeship Plan since the committee last met.

In a nutshell, this is a collaboration between ourselves and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to increase the number of apprentices working in public sector employers.

That includes the HSE, local authorities, Government Department etc.

We are continuing to make good progress on the number of registrations in the area of apprenticeship. By end of December this year there were 27,470 apprentices, with 8,712 having registered in 2023. This represents a 54% increase on the number of registrations in 2019.

2024 is the year of reform for apprenticeships. We need to move to a single system of apprenticeships.

We cannot and should not have a craft system on one side and consortia-led programmes on another.

That cannot continue. But this is not about one side becoming dominant over the other.

We are working to take the best of both models and create a new system.

Apprenticeship pay will have to be a part of the conversation too.

We have received draft proposals on this but a final report is not due until the end of January.

We will engage with Minister Coveney, and trade union and business partners at that stage.

Colleagues, I will finish now and will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

I think we can agree the Department has achieved significant success in recent years.

Going forward though, we have a duty to respond to the key economic and societal challenges our country is facing.

We have a key role in responding to the housing challenge in terms of creating the workforce needed to build the houses needed, but also building more student housing.

We have a key role in responding to the skills shortages the economy are facing – whether that is in healthcare, or the hospitality sector.

In order to remain competitive, we must invest in our people and invest in talent.

That requires significant investment in research, innovation and talent.

That is the work of this Department. I look forward to working with you all to address these key challenges.

Thank you chair.