

## SSUNI Opening Statement

Dear Chairperson, Deputies and Senators, the Secondary Students Union of Northern Ireland (SSUNI) very much welcomes the opportunity to be here today to discuss North-South educational mobility.

We refer to the union as SSUNI and I will do so throughout my statement. SSUNI was founded in 2020 and is powered by young people for young people. We have grown to now represent more than 58,000 member students across Northern Ireland. The issue of North-South mobility has always been an important topic to SSUNI and one which our members have frequently raised as a concern. When our new executive took up their roles at the beginning of September, CAO reform for Northern Irish Students became a top campaign priority for us. We have met with the Irish Universities working group and engaged with several parties concerning our campaign.

I would like to first say that we welcome the planned reforms to the way A-levels equate to CAO points and feel this is a very positive step forward. However, we don't feel that these steps go far enough to combat the unfair disadvantage NI students have in how their A levels are equated to points. As we understand it, the proposed reforms require students to take three A levels alongside a fourth A level, AS level or Extended project to achieve the maximum 600 points as opposed to the current requirement of four A levels. Under the proposed changes, students would also be able to achieve the maximum points with two A levels and two AS levels. These changes don't reflect the reality for NI students, where an estimated fewer than 4% of students take 4 A levels. While a higher number choose to take a fourth A level for one year (in lower sixth) and complete an AS level, this number is still very low and not standard in Northern Ireland. It is most common that students take 3 A levels, and this is what the vast majority of UK universities give offers based on. A situation where a student takes two A levels and two AS levels is highly unusual. Therefore, we would recommend students be able to achieve the maximum number of CAO points with three A levels.

Further, the GCSE language requirement at many universities here acts as a deterrent to Northern Irish Students applying. A recent report from ESRI (Economic and Social Research Institute) found that the language requirement for universities here puts off NI students from applying to universities in the Republic. This too has been echoed by our members in the process of applying for university. There is a wide variation between students' opportunities and accessibility to learn languages within their schools. Taking a language at GCSE is not a requirement in most schools in Northern Ireland and therefore pupils without a keen interest in language do not take it. They are unknowingly closing off the opportunity to study at many institutions in the Republic of Ireland at just 13 or 14 years old.

This brings me to one of our larger points which is the confusion many students face in understanding applying to universities using CAO. Students from Northern Ireland must, with limited access to information, try to understand a points system they are completely unfamiliar with, fill out the CAO form and try to understand different courses and universities all of which is significantly different to the UK university application process. They feel so thrown in at the deep end that many give up applying through CAO altogether.

What do we see as the solution to this problem? We want to see communication. Communication between universities and schools, universities and teachers, universities, and students. Students want to feel supported and aware of their options. We would like to see a more conscious effort from Irish Universities to inform young people in NI about study options at their institution such as attending University fairs or visiting schools in NI.

We would also like to acknowledge the fact that even when Northern Ireland students are offered places in the Republic of Ireland at University, they are less likely to take them. The later announcement of Irish University places is one of the key reasons for this; leaving students little time to scramble to find accommodation and make arrangements. Many students have already accepted offers at UK universities by the time Irish university places are released.

Too many students from the North are pushed out from applying to the South altogether for university because of subject choices they made as young teenagers, overwhelmed at the task of applying due to a lack of support or unaware that the Republic of Ireland is even a viable option for them to study, to begin with. We want to see Northern Irish students seeing the opportunities to feasibly study on the island and be able to learn at the great institutions that are on offer across the island. All Northern Irish students are asking for is a fair shot so let's bridge the gap. Its time to break down barriers and open doors so Northern Irish students can have equal access to the wealth of opportunities on offer in Irish Universities.

Thank you for your time.