

Cathaoirleach, members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

My name is Shari Irfan and I am the Uachtarán of the Irish Second-level Student's Union.

As the national representative body for school students of Ireland, one of the core elements of our work is ensuring that students remain core stakeholders in the decisions that affect them. We strive to represent, uplift and defend the voices of students in second-level education.

Speaking to our members I am aware that there are genuine challenges around the mobility of students seeking to study both here in Ireland and in Northern Ireland. The challenges present themselves in a number of ways often linking with one another.

Students both north and south find the other's application process to be extremely daunting. Two different approaches to two very differing systems. For example, the concept of doing a personal statement for UCAS is somewhat bewildering to students in Ireland who are used to purely relying on points to enter third level. Students need support as they are used to being only judged on academic performance and not used to writing about themselves.

Ensuring that there are standardised resources available to students and guidance counsellors, north and south is extremely important. Having clear and understandable language for both processes would reduce anxiety

As we are all acutely aware, as the pressures around the cost of education grows. From talking to students on the ground I find myself asking if becoming a college student is even affordable? The stress that students face around finding accommodation is immense. The cost, commutability and accommodation, is one of the lead factors in what students put at the top of their CAO. From talking to students it's not just about the points race anymore but about not bankrupting their families. The pursuit of education is being curtailed by the cost. We must move towards purpose built, affordable student accommodation to ensure second-level student's transitioning to third level education are housed.

As a nation we so often talk about how difficult it is to acquire and retain healthcare professionals within the HSE, yet at the same time the system we operate under makes it harder for students in Ireland to access these courses as the cost for them

soars. As this happens students and their families both in Northern Ireland and Ireland struggle to come to terms with the cost.

In my role as an Uachtarán of the ISSU, I spent the latter half of the last year travelling up and down the country meeting with students on a regional level. When I asked students what is the issue that affects you directly, most of them said public transport.

The use of efficient and affordable public transport is an indispensable aspect of student life, yet another area of challenge where students have to make a decision on where they want to pursue their studies, not on the basis of the course they want but rather on if they will make it to their nine am lecture in time.

An all island approach is needed to create an efficient public transport system that ensures accessibility and affordability for all who live on the island. Ease of transport gives more opportunity to these students to not only decide to study north and south but also to engage with each other through their studies. North-South mobility doesn't just affect whether someone studies- but how students develop relationships.

I remember distinctly looking at my options having that conversation that so many young people my age have with their parents about where they are looking to go for university. And I sat down with my parents who are sitting in the gallery here today watching me speak. One thing was for certain that the option to study in Northern Ireland simply was not a reality for me. As an Immigrant for me to have even considered applying for the north I would have had to restart my immigration process in Northern Ireland which is simply not a reality for students like me. No young person regardless where they were born should have to cross barriers to get their education, barriers which their peers do not encounter. The visa application process must be made more streamlined. We need equitable and efficient visa access on both sides of the border, welcoming students from all backgrounds.

Ultimately the issues that we see around the mobility of students both in Northern Ireland and in Ireland are not only practical issues but there are human issues, it is not as simple as making sure students have the right type of transport to get to get their education it's about creating a space in which the gaps are bridged between communities and an understanding is created between young people. And we can only do that by changing the culture around the conversation by cultivating an inclusive environment that ensures that students from all walks of life feel a sense of belonging.

In conclusion, addressing the differences in student experiences between Ireland and Northern Ireland requires our collective effort. By streamlining the application

process, providing adequate resources to understand each other's systems, tackling accommodation challenges, addressing the cost of education, improving public transport, ensuring fair visa access, and promoting integration. We can make a step in the right direction.

I want to affirm to you the ISSU's want to engage with stakeholders. Partnership is what we need. And I wish to express to you our enthusiasm to work closely with this committee and its members in the future.

I would like to thank you for the opportunity again and I look forward to answering any questions.