

# NUS-USI Briefing

## Briefing on devolution and the need to invest in students

### Current situation and importance of devolved government here

- The current stalemate must be broken through more intensive and more focused talks. It is also crucial that we see civic society being brought into to the talks equation to provide ideas.
- Fresh ideas are required, like alternative options to keep devolution up and running.
- It's crucial that a deal to restore the powersharing Executive here is delivered urgently, as the return of devolution could deliver stability and opportunities to invest in skills, the economy and public services.
- It's also crucial that a civic society forum is set up to provide innovation help address intractable problems facing devolved government here.

### Direct rule

- It is important that even if there is direct rule, a civic forum is established to provide Northern Ireland insight on policy issues, and budgetary and other problems.
- If direct rule is imposed it government should consider the appointment a Northern Ireland stakeholder experts group for each of the main aspects of government like health, education, justice and economy and skills for example.
- If direct rule is imposed it is vital that the region is not punished for any failure of a few politicians here to deliver agreement.
- There must be no increase in tuition fees here. Northern Ireland is a low income area with significant economic challenges, so it must not see any increased fees system.

## **NUS-USI objectives regarding the impact of Brexit**

- We want guarantees on continued student mobility cross-border on the island of Ireland
- All EU citizens here must have the right to remain here
- Continued access to EU funding on teaching and learning
- There must be no increases in fees for students studying on a cross-border basis
- All protections and rights within the 1998 Belfast Agreement must be retained

## **NUS-USI student wellbeing survey**

NUS-USI published our wellbeing survey in 2017 and 3680 valid responses were received, making it arguably the largest student mental health survey ever carried out here. The headline results were:

- 78% of students surveyed indicated they had experienced mental health worries over the past year;
- When asked which factor they believed contributed to any mental health issues they had, 42% of respondents said their course, and 39% said lack of money/financial pressure;
- Increasing financial support for students was the most chosen response regarding what they believed would address mental health issues facing students, with 63% of respondents choosing this option.

## **Key findings from NUS-USI's Pound in Your Pocket student finance survey:**

- Over 60% of undergraduate respondents across the sample agreed or strongly agreed that 'I regularly worry about not having enough money to meet my basic living expenses, such as rent and utility bills'.
- Over 47% of all undergraduate respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement: 'I feel able to concentrate on my studies without worrying about finances.'
- Course costs – Around 69 per cent of undergraduate respondents had paid for materials, activities or other costs associated with completing their programme of study.
- Almost 70% of all respondents across FE and HE were concerned about future levels of debt.

## **NUS-USI narrative on tuition fees**



- We believe that more investment in HE and FE is essential to ensure fees can be scrapped or kept capped at current levels.
- Any increase in fees could marketise education and could mean less people enrol in courses here, because Northern Ireland is a low income economy. Low income can be linked to debt aversion, and people may not be willing to take on additional debts.
- A key part of any fiscal stimulus must be investment in tertiary education and student to boost enrolment and student retention and help meet the skill needs of business.
- The options paper published following the big conversation on higher education funding showed that to deliver free education and restore 2014/15 provision pre-cuts would cost £116.1m annually. The paper show that these cuts were to the value of £16.1m annually, so to simply deliver free education would cost £100m annually.
- According to a Universities Scotland briefing, almost half of funding for Scotland's higher education institutions comes from revenue raised by institutions through research, international fees, consultancy and other services, only 51% of overall funding is public funding. It's important that universities here endeavour to increase the revenue they raise through research. Information from Universities Scotland and the Universities UK studies on the impact on the economy of Ulster University and Queen's University demonstrates that these two institutions rely far more heavily upon public funding than institutions in Scotland, even though there is free education in Scotland.
- A report previously released by the Higher Education Commission, labelled the fees situation in England as not sustainable and as the worst of both worlds. NUS's 'A Roadmap for Free Education' document states: "The government's experiment in fees and marketisation has been a catastrophic failure and is irreparable."
- A recent NUS survey of students studying in the up to £9,000 fees regime was carried out, called "Debt in the first degree Attitudes and behaviours of the first £9k fee paying graduates" It found that:
  - 56% of graduates believed that their degree was not worth the cost of their tuition fees, with 17% believing it was worth considerably less.
  - 1 in 20 graduates said that if they could go back, they would not have gone to university at all, citing cost of study and level of debt as the main reasons.
  - 77% of graduates were worried or very worried about their student debt.
  - Cost of study had an impact on choice of institution in 45% of cases.

## How government can deliver free education

- Increasing the regional rate for the richest business and households, by making it based on ability to pay.
- Addressing the cost of division on society which could be as much as £1billion annually.
- Re-allocating and re-prioritising some of the funding that goes to Invest NI, and investing it in tertiary education instead.
- The funding from the Westminster deal addresses significant pressures and could open opportunities.

