

Diane Dodds MLA  
Minister for the Economy  
Department for the Economy  
Netherleigh, Massey Avenue  
Belfast BT4 2JP

01/02/2021

Dear Minister Dodds

I am writing to you on behalf of NIC-ICTU in support of additional support for Third-level students from the Department for the Economy.

We do so fully aware that the Department you lead faces significant pressures from a constantly evolving pandemic, and that every corner of our economy and the special responsibilities of the DfE seeks further assistance, but the multi-faceted series of challenges facing the third-level sector deserves particular consideration as many of those being impacted most are young people right at the cusp of adulthood and full participation in our collective economic environment.

Many years ago, labour market specialists identified the 'scarring' impact of youth unemployment, and many of the policies of the NI Executive (and the EU Parliament in which you served) in the aftermath of the 2008 Financial Crash were aimed at alleviating the risk of a 'lost generation'.

This is a risk we cannot allow to fester as a side-product of the necessary restrictions policies to protect the wider population from Covid-19. It is inevitable that every participant in our society and our economy will be impacted financially, but it can be argued that those at the start of their working lives are less resourced to cope with such pressures, and that some extra assistance is justified. Here are some areas which your Department can assist students

### **:Accommodation**

Given the pandemic there is a civic onus on HE/FE institutions to do all in their power to discourage students from unnecessary travel. Students should be released from rental agreements and have rent refunds for accommodation not occupied. This is a health and Safety issue, as contract releases and rent rebates will mean that students will not be tempted to take up paid for accommodation where it would not otherwise be needed to access teaching.

We are aware that the situation is complex in that students rent from a range of providers including directly from 3rd level-institutions and private landlords. Hence a comprehensive government package as well as government pressure on private landlords to assist students in this predicament is necessary as a matter of public health.

[info@ictuni.org](mailto:info@ictuni.org)

[www.ictuni.org](http://www.ictuni.org)

## **Fees**

Students are already being faced with years of debt because of Fees. This is an opportunity for the Executive to look at the long term implications of fees in deterring many students from HE because of the prohibitive costs. Education is an investment in the future and should not be turned into an unequal market place where universities have to compete to attract fee paying students, detracting from what educators should be doing. In addition, access to some of the available Assembly funding could be used to alleviate the financial hardships being faced by current students via a rebate / reduction in fees.

As a result of this pandemic many students are additionally finding, that through no fault of their own, they cannot take up placements that are integral to them achieving their learning outcomes. This may entail students having to undertake another year of study and associated debt to be able to do their placement and complete their course in the future . This is an added and unforeseen expense for these students and financial support needs to be put in place to support them.

## **PhD Extensions**

Research work has been and continues to be severally disrupted and delayed due to the pandemic. A comprehensive package should be put in place to allow for paid extensions to all funded PhD research. The impact is not only being felt by those in their final year but by all PhD researchers at all stages of the research project.

## **Virtual Learning Costs**

Students are also facing other costs linked to accessing virtual learning. Many still have insufficient hard and software, have connectivity issues and have increased costs in having to heat their homes whilst working from home. It would be a welcome boost if financial support could be offered to those students who continue to struggle with finding the finances for these additional costs and pressures.

We thank you for your consideration and look forward to further engagement on this and other related matters.

Regards



## **Owen Reidy**

Assistant General Secretary  
NIC-ICTU