



UUSU DRAFT PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

UUSU is committed to advocating on behalf of students at every level and opportunity. We submitted the following response to the Executive's draft Programme for Government consultation, informed by feedback we have had from students on a range of priorities, and your Student Executive's plan of work for this year.

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GROW A GLOBALLY COMPETITIVE AND SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY

MAGEE EXPANSION

UUSU welcomes the commitment from the Northern Ireland Executive to the continued expansion of the Magee Campus by supporting the Magee Taskforce in developing and overseeing their action plan. We do however want to correct the Executive on the scope of the expansion; the Programme for Government has a target of “up to” 10’000 students, when this is the minimum number we are aiming for.

UUSU understands that there are significant challenges in delivering the expansion of the Magee Campus, and to support the taskforce to deliver in line with its schedule encourages the Executive to focus on the following:

- **Maximum Aggregate Student Number**

Lift the current Maximum Aggregate Student Number (MaSN) cap in place, to support more students to study within NI, in order to address the brain drain and remove the “economic handbrake” that this places upon the NI economy.

We ask that the Executive considers that international student numbers are expected to fall, students from Great Britain remain at low levels, and the competitive market for students from across the border. For Magee, the City of Derry-Londonderry, and the Northwest to achieve its potential and reach the 10,000 student figure, the Executive will require a change in policy around MaSN and further investment. This is also a chance to rectify the educational imbalance found in the Northwest compared to the rest of Northern Ireland.

- **Public Transport**

For Magee to achieve the 10,000-student number by 2032, we will require active policy decisions, not only of bringing in local students from the Northwest and border areas but new students in a continuation of active course moves from the Belfast and Coleraine Campuses alongside new courses. This already has put an active strain on the campus and surrounding areas for car parking and from a public transport perspective. An active investment programme and more than a consideration from the executive in regard to the All-Ireland rail review is required. This alongside active measures to support the university, local community and agency partners are required to unlock the full potential of the area.

- **Purpose Built Student Accommodation**

The existing housing model and policy for students is failing to meet their needs. The taskforce indicates that the expansion of Purpose Built Student Accommodation places will require an investment of £275m for 3600 units. This indicates that to ensure a return in investment for private providers the expectation is to deliver accommodation at a standard and cost that is unaffordable for the majority of potential students. We must address these issues to ensure students receive fair and affordable housing options. This is particularly important when we consider the socio-economic background of many of the target demographics that the taskforce has identified who are key to achieving the new student numbers in Magee who may not be able to afford to live in the area.

- **Funding**

UUSU note the significant public and private sector funding required for this project to take shape and to be delivered on time. This project to enhance the economy and the economic wellbeing of the Northwest and wider NI economy will, in the view of UUSU, require additional funding from the public sector and we call upon the executive to commit to the funding required in the potential absence of private sector investment.

This includes initiatives to invest and then subsequently recoup money from private investors. The Northwest region cannot be allowed to have another commitment fall through like previous plans announced back in 2008.

WORK

UUSU commends the emphasis on the “Good Jobs” initiative, particularly the Productivity Initiative and the introduction of a Good Work Charter, as outlined in the Programme for Government. These actions demonstrate a forward-thinking approach to fostering high-quality employment opportunities, which will greatly benefit students and graduates transitioning into the workforce. The focus on productivity and fair work standards aligns closely with the needs of young professionals in Northern Ireland, supporting them in securing stable, fulfilling, and well-compensated jobs.

We would like to draw attention to a specific challenge faced by international students who are limited to 20 working hours per week—a restriction that often makes it difficult to meet rising living costs. Additionally, students with restricted visas have no access to work, placing further financial strain on them. While we understand that immigration policies fall under the UK Home Office, we would appreciate if the Assembly could raise this issue with them, advocating for increased working hours or expanded work rights to help ease financial burdens on international students.

DELIVER MORE

AFFORDABLE CHILDCARE

There is a significant percentage of UUSU membership with caring responsibilities, a majority of this percentage being students with children. Childcare comes with a series of unique challenges when you are a student.

Whilst it is encouraging to see the Executives investment and recognition of the childcare sector, it must be acknowledged that there remains a significant level of uncertainty which requires swift clarity and action. Melted Parents, the childcare reform campaign group, identified four core impacts on the childcare sector:

- **Providers are likely to pass this cost onto parents, which may make childcare less affordable/more expensive for parents.**
- **With increased fees and caps on TFC and the NICSS - these subsidies won't go as far for working parents.**
- **Families may have to reduce their working hours to reduce their childcare bill.**
- **Providers may alter their services due to costs, for example reducing hours, availability or have to cut costs elsewhere like food quality or extracurricular activities.**

Students find that childcare can rapidly become a barrier to one not only reaching higher education but fulfilling their programme duration. With students have limited availability to work paired with the rising cost of living, it is crucial that the soaring costs of childcare are addressed to eliminate the barrier it creates to accessing education. Therefore, UUSU supports the campaign group, Melted Parents, call for Westminster to lift the cap on Tax Free Childcare and the Northern Ireland Executive to lift the cap of Northern Ireland Childcare Support Scheme.

ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST

WOMEN AND GIRLS

UUSU commends the Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls strategy the Executive has committed to. Students have told us via our democratic structures and feedback mechanisms that this is an issue that impacts their lives, and they want their

elected representatives to take it seriously. We look forward to seeing the impact the full implementation this work will have across our society. We are also encouraged by conversations we have had with the Minister for Justice and her team on anti-spiking, and welcome her plans to bring a Legislative Consent Motion to Stormont when Westminster passes anti-spiking legislation, expected in this parliament.

UUSU acknowledges that this important work is happening, and we would like to see specific targets and a clearer link to the strategy and its aims in the Programme for Government. We believe that as it stands, it looks like this work stands separate and would like it to be clearer that the strategy and its implementation is integral to the Programme for Government.

PROVIDE MORE SOCIAL, AFFORDABLE AND SUSTAINABLE HOUSING

UUSU agrees with the Executive that “good housing is essential to our health and wellbeing.” ‘Good’ housing is in our view affordable, fit for purpose, and safe. However, students tell us through our Advice Bureau and through student council that this is often not the case for their accommodation while they study.

Students are facing specific problems within the housing sector, and it is a concern for us that these are not addressed in the draft Programme for Government. In particular we want to see regulation for private owned purpose built student accommodation (PBSAs.)

With the expansion of the Magee campus in Derry/Londonderry, the Magee Taskforce has indicated that the private sector and particularly PBSAs will be used to accommodate the increase to 10,000 students who will likely need accommodation in the city.

Based on a sample of Belfast-based purpose-built student accommodation providers, the average weekly cost of PBSA bedrooms ranges from £163.71 (123 York Street) to £207.64 (Student Roost, John Bell House,) or £654.84 and £830.56 per 4-week basis respectively.

UUSU is asking that the Executive commit to regulation of these providers, to prevent exploitation of students and prioritise widening access to education for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Failure to do so will price these students out of education, and may contribute to the brain drain we see in Northern Ireland.

Additionally, we join NUS-USI in calling on the Northern Ireland Executive support Alex Sobel MP's amendment to the Renter's Rights Bill passing through the UK Parliament, which would legislate against requirements for rental guarantors. Guarantors are a barrier for students accessing housing, and significantly impact students from low socio-economic backgrounds who lack family members who meet the requirements to be a guarantor (i.e. they do not own a home and/or do not have the savings required.) This requirement is also a barrier for EU and international students if they don't have family or close connections in the UK who could act as a guarantor.

PROTECTING LOUGH NEAGH

AND THE ENVIRONMENT

UUSU is supportive of improving the environment in Northern Ireland. As mandated by our membership via student council policy, UUSU is committed to speaking up against the climate crisis, which will have the most impact on the students we represent in their futures.

UUSU is concerned by the current ecological crisis taking place in Lough Neagh. To rectify these issues and safeguard our Lough in the future, we ask the Executive to make the following commitments;

- **The full removal of the Earl of Shaftesbury as legal owner of the Lough and this responsibility transferred to Lough Neagh Partnerships;**
- **Lough Neagh Partnerships empowered and financed as custodians of Lough Neagh;**
- **Make business grants such as the Water Quality Improvement Strand Grant only be made available to businesses who have invested time/resources into preserving the Lough;**
- **The Executive will look at current standards for the water quality of Lough Neagh, and legislate for requirements to keep Lough Neagh's water purity/safety well above the minimum standard for drinking water.**

ARE THERE ANY OTHER PRIORITIES THAT SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT?

MINORITY LANGUAGES; GAEILGE & ULSTER SCOTS

UUSU is concerned there is no reference to minority languages in the draft programme for Government. This is particularly notable as the Executive have failed to appoint an Irish Language Commissioner or an Ulster Scots Commissioner, as mandated by the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022.

Students have repeatedly via student council and other feedback mechanisms told UUSU that they value the Irish language as something that belongs to everyone in Northern Ireland across communities, an approach we believed the executive shared. Given the many pieces of legislation in place to support the language, including but not limited to the Irish Language Act and the New Decade, New Approach agreement, we ask that the Executive honours their mandated commitments to support Gaeilge by, at a minimum, appointing an Irish Language Commissioner and committing to this in the Programme for Government.

BUILDING NEW FOUNDATIONS; INVESTMENT IN INFRASTRUCTURE

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

While UUSU commends the commitment to transport safety through the publishment of a Road Safety Strategy and Action Plan and the railway progress made through The All-Island Strategic Rail Review, we feel that a lack of emphasis has been placed on the efficiency of public transport services.

An example of the unreliable nature of transport and its impact on students is the U2 bus service between Jordanstown, Ulster University Belfast Campus, and Queens University. UUSU has had reports of the bus not turning up at both Jordanstown & the Belfast Campus. There have also been multiple reports of the bus neglecting to turn into the Jordanstown turning circle and instead, letting passengers off at or on a pedestrian crossing instead.

This has proved to be a major safety hazard, as cars have been observed to overtake the bus as it has stopped in the middle of the road. The U2 service is not adequate for students, as they are relying on its punctuality to get to class or sports fixtures on time. The rising costs of public transport remain an issue for students, with many of Ulster University students being over the age of 23, and therefore not able to access the discounted yLink smartcard. We ask that the Executive reviews these issues, and puts pressure on Translink to rectify them.