

Motion 1

That the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) calls upon both the Minister of the Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science and Directors of Social Work Programmes at universities across Ireland, along with their associated staff, to ensure and advocate for the implementation of a significant reduction in tuition fees for social work courses.

Explanation: Social work is fundamentally committed to promoting social justice, human rights, and equity. Central to the profession are the principles of diversity and inclusivity, and the goal to dismantle systemic and institutional barriers. However, the rising tuition fees for social work programmes across Irish universities starkly contradict these values, imposing significant barriers to entry, particularly for those from marginalised communities whom the profession seeks to support and represent. This motion outlines urgent reasons why a substantial reduction in these fees is essential:

1. **Critical Shortage of Social Workers:** Social work as a profession is currently facing significant challenges in terms of recruitment and retention. As of September 2023, there were 340 vacant roles in Tusla alone, highlighting a severe shortage of qualified social workers across Ireland. This shortage compromises the quality and reach of essential social services across Ireland.
2. **Urgent Equity Concerns:** Over the past three years, tuition fees for social work programmes have risen sharply, with increases of up to 23% exacerbating financial barriers. This rise is particularly impactful for students from underrepresented and marginalised communities, including Black and ethnic minority groups like Irish Travellers. For instance, MSW fees at the University of Galway have escalated from €7,016 in 2021 to €8,640 in 2024. Such steep increases directly challenge the social work profession's commitment to inclusivity and anti-racism, making it increasingly difficult for diverse communities to access the education necessary to serve their own populations effectively.
3. **Economic Barriers Deter Entry:** Despite initiatives and calls to expand social work course capacities and introduce alternative pathways such as apprenticeships, a decline in applicant numbers suggests that these efforts are being undercut by the high costs of education. Comprehensive reports from Mooney, Wilson, and Kelleher (2023) and O'Meara and Kelleher (2022) confirm that the prohibitive expense of social work education is a major deterrent for prospective students. In a detailed survey by Mooney et al. (2023), an overwhelming majority of respondents (47 out of 49) identified 'financial burden' as their primary obstacle to pursuing a career in social work, highlighting the urgent need for tuition fee reductions.

4. **Disparity in Tuition Fees Across Institutions:** There is also a significant variation in tuition fees for social work programmes across Irish universities, with amounts ranging from €16,000 to €20,000 for a two-year MA, excluding the additional significant and often hidden costs for mandatory placements. In contrast, Atlantic Technological University offers a more affordable option at €9,500. This substantial disparity raises critical questions about the equity and transparency in how these fees are calculated and the implications for access to education.
5. **High Fees for Non-EU Students:** The tuition fees for non-EU students, on average approximately €40,000 for the two-year MA in Social Work or €110,400 for a four-year BSS in Trinity, are particularly exorbitant. This pricing structure is at odds with efforts to 'decolonise' the profession and create a more diverse and inclusive workforce.
6. **Economic Barriers for Working-Class Students:** The combination of high tuition fees and unpaid, extensive mandatory fieldwork placements severely limits access to social work education for working-class students. These financial barriers not only marginalise those from less affluent backgrounds but also actively undermine efforts to diversify the profession. Reports by Mooney et al. (2023) and O'Meara and Kelleher (2022) highlight how such economic obstacles impede the development of a socio-economically diverse workforce and discourage individuals who are unable to shoulder substantial debt. One respondent poignantly captures this issue in Mooney et al. (2023), stating, "they make it so difficult for people to actually do the course and what they're doing is they're actually putting off an awful lot of people who are from the very communities that they should have in the profession, because they're making it into very much a middle-class profession by making the fees prohibitive" (p.33). Additionally, the financial strain is vividly described by another participant: "The master's in social work is extremely expensive - especially since social workers are in demand. Placements are long – necessary, but students are essentially paying thousands of euros to work full-time hours for free. This creates work burdens and means students are often having to work weekends to financially cope. This can mean students are regularly working a 7-day week. Not sustainable" (p.37).
7. **Critical Diversity in Social Work Education:** As mentioned above, the prohibitive costs of social work education are a major obstacle in cultivating a workforce that reflects the diversity of the community- an essential factor for delivering effective social work services. Current fee structures disproportionately impact non-white and non-middle-class individuals, significantly limiting their entry into the field. A respondent from Mooney et al.'s (2023) study highlights this issue, stating, "Social work claims to reflect diverse groups, however academic fees within Ireland act as a barrier for including people from a low socioeconomic background into the profession" (p.23). This underscores how financial barriers prevent the profession from serving as a true reflection of the diverse populations it aims to support.

Moreover, O'Meara and Kelleher's (2022) report highlights the necessity for educational application process reforms to effectively attract a wider array of asocial work students. Implementing such reforms is crucial not only for fostering cultural competency within the social work sector but also for ensuring that practitioners bring diverse lived experiences that are in tune with the multifaceted needs and challenges of the communities they serve.

8. Critical reforms needed: Although Mooney et al. (2023) and O'Meara and Kelleher (2022) recognise that many universities have launched initiatives to widen participation, they argue that these efforts are insufficient and that more needs to be done. Specifically in the field of social work, there is a significant need for more focused measures to increase access and enhance diversity within the profession. In response to these challenges, it is crucial for directors and staff of social work programmes to engage in concerted efforts with universities and educational policymakers. Reducing fees should be the immediate first step in this endeavor. However, this action should be part of a broader overhaul. This entails a comprehensive re-evaluation and restructuring of fee frameworks to ensure affordability, equity, and inclusivity in social work education. Only through such concerted efforts can we attract a diverse student body that authentically reflects and serves the communities it aims to empower.

This AGM is called upon to actively lead and encourage its members to participate in advocacy efforts aimed at reducing the costs of social work education. By doing so, the association will reaffirm its commitment to the core values of social work- social justice, human rights, equality, anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice, and ensure that these values are reflected not only in professional practice but also in access to education.

References:

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Proposed by: Dearbhla Ní Chúláin

Seconded by: Oliver Brockmann

Motion 2

That the Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) calls upon the Minister of the Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science for the financial reimbursement of social work placements and support initiatives and measures working towards this aim.

Explanation: As the *signature pedagogy* of social work education, placements play a crucial role in forming competent practitioners who can effectively connect and apply theoretical knowledge in their practice (O'Meara, 2024). Despite their critical role, social work placements in Ireland remain unpaid, an exploitative practice that undermines their educational value and therefore purpose, while also undermining social work workforce recruitment efforts. Financial reimbursement for placements is paramount to ensure the diversity and competency of the future social work workforce, bolster the professional status of social work, and uphold the future sustainability of the social work profession.

Unpaid placements impose a disproportionate burden on economically marginalised students. Moreover, as race, gender, and dis/ability status disparities are inherently interlinked with economic inequalities, the financial burden of social work placements act as an entry barrier for those from marginalised communities, thus reinforcing oppressive race, class, gender and dis/ability status inequities (Gair and Baglow, 2017). This contradicts the professions commitment anti-racism, diversity and social justice.

Furthermore, the absence of financial remuneration undermines social work's status as a legitimate profession by perpetuating the notion that social work is akin to volunteerism rather than skilled labour. Students from adjacent professions such as nursing, midwifery and clinical psychology are remunerated, highlighting the valued professional status of these professions (The Psychological Society of Ireland, 2022; Campbell, 2023).

Importantly, the lack of financial remuneration for placements is a significant deterrent to starting and completing social work degrees (Morley *et al.*, 2022), critically undermining recruitment efforts at a time when Ireland faces a severe shortage of qualified social workers. Considering that the "overall number of applicants to existing courses appears in fact to be falling recently, with some individual HEI's also reporting challenges in filling existing programme places from one year to the next" (O'Meara, 2024, p. 6) it is quizzical why there is no attempt to explore the possibilities for financial remuneration for placements or the reduction of course fees as the initial method of recruitment; Especially when considering exorbitant university fee hikes to study social work and the accommodation crisis. Instead, there are explorations concerning the expansion of the number of programmes and placements. This is utterly illogical and fails to address the root causes of the recruitment problem, particularly when considering that, as O'Meara (2024, p. 7, emphasis in original) notes, "placements *do* get filled each year".

Recognising the self-evident exploitative practice of unpaid placements, the way that this reproduces societal inequalities and undermines initiatives to reduce labour shortages, the EU parliament, in June 2023, voted overwhelmingly in support of the drafting of legislation to ban unpaid internships in the EU (O'Carroll and Kassam, 2024).

Additionally, the necessity for students to seek and balance paid employment with their unpaid placements often results in diminished educational outcomes (Morley, 2023). Providing financial remuneration for these placements will allow students to fully immerse themselves in their professional development, enhancing the depth of their learning and ensuring the competence of future practitioners (Morley, 2023). Contrary to concerns that financial remuneration might reduce the educational value of placements to mere employment, it is actually the absence of payment that undermines the educational potential of these experiences. The lack of financial support forces students to divide their focus between paid employment to sustain themselves and their placements, detracting from the quality of their learning during placements. It is, again, quizzical why there is so much attention ensuring that there are adequate placement opportunities available to future social work students (see for example O'Meara, 2024), but no attempt to ensure that future social work students can actually engage with the learning opportunities that are made possible by these placements.

Furthermore, given the current overburdened state of the profession and the shortage of qualified social workers, students frequently step in to fill essential personnel gaps within organisations. Compensating students for their placements acknowledges their valuable contributions and aligns with the ethical mandate of the profession that all workers, which includes students, deserve fair compensation.

Payment for work, that includes the work of students while on placements, is a fundamental aspect of any respected profession. The fact that social work placements are not paid, is fatal for students, the quality of their education and the future of the profession. There are numerous international movements such as P4P, students against placement poverty, and paid placements Aotearoa NZ which recognise the importance of addressing "placement poverty" (Morley, 2023, no page).

This motion, if passed, would represent a significant step forward in strengthening the social work education system in Ireland, ultimately enhancing the quality of social service delivery across the country.

References

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Gair, S. and Baglow, L. (2018) 'Australian Social Work Students Balancing Study, Work, and Field Placement: Seeing it Like it Is', *Australian Social Work*, 71(1), pp. 46–57.

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Psychological Society of Ireland (2022) Psychological Society of Ireland calls on the Minister for Health to address the disparity in funding for psychology trainees. Available at: <https://www.psychologicalsociety.ie/source/Press%20Releases/Press%20Release%20-%20Calls%20for%20the%20disparity%20in%20funding%20for%20psychology%20trainees%20to%20be%20addressed.pdf> (Accessed: 1 May 2024).

Proposed by: Oliver Brockmann

Seconded by: Dearbhla Ní Chúláin

Motion 3

The IASW calls upon the HSE to lift its recruitment embargo for social work posts within adult community mental health teams.

Explanation:

1. National mental health policy 'A Vision for Change' and the updated 'Sharing the Vision' outline that each community mental health team (CMHT) should include social work (VFC) 9.9 & the composition of (CMHT serving a population of 50,000 should comprise...two psychiatric social workers (one per 25,000), (VFC) 11.7.1. Each patient attending community mental health teams should have an allocated key worker and care plan (STV) recommendation 28. Not replacing vacant social work posts within community mental health teams would be a breach of national mental health policy.
2. The arbitrary recruitment embargo prevents the recruitment to vacant social work posts within community mental health teams.

3. The embargo is placing an unfair burden on those social workers remaining within mental health services to cover vacant posts, it is affecting the quality-of-service provision to service users, many at risk of homelessness, delaying their discharge from acute psychiatric units and limiting the support they may need to stay well.
4. Social work students qualifying this summer who are interested in working within community mental health teams may seek employment outside of Ireland because of this recruitment embargo.

Proposed by: Frank Browne

Seconded by: Kerry Cuskelly

Motion 4

That the IASW board convene a working group whose aim is to develop a SMART action plan in relation to Advanced social work practice based on the SWAMH April 2024... in adult mental health briefing paper.

Explanation: Within a rapidly changing and evolving health and social care climate, investment in the further development of the vital role of social work across Irish social and health services should be a key priority for government departments, employers and the public. Recent reports have highlighted the need for reform of health and social care professions roles in the area of advanced practice and the priorities off the Chief HSCP Office includes developing advanced practice roles across health and social care professions in Ireland. At departmental level, a Health and Social Care Workforce Planning Strategy, Action Plan and Planning Projection Model is being developed with technical support provided by the European Commission. A key outcome of this project is the production of rolling health and social care workforce planning action plans with targeted policy measures for health and social care workforce reform.

Proposed by: Kerry Cuskelly

Seconded by: Sinead McKenna

Motion 5

That the IASW call on the HSE to resource Social Work staffing in CAMHS to the recommended levels as per Vision for Change. We are currently resourced nationally at only 40% Vision for Change.

Explanation: The low levels of Social Work staffing in CAMHS is having a direct impact on the service users. There is a very significant systemic component to CAMHS presentations and therefore a systemic response is required to aid recovery. Social Work intervention is required in almost all CAMHS cases, however, due to shortages it is not always possible to provide the required input. Safeguarding is another significant regulatory requirement and SW provide leadership and oversight on this on MDT's.

Proposed by: Mary Mc Namara

Seconded by: Lisa Hurson