



# NUS-USI PRESIDENT MANIFESTO



**FOR STUDENTS. WITH STUDENTS. ALWAYS**



VOLUNTEER NOW

# IMPACT AWARDS

YOUTH VOLUNTEERS INSPIRING CHANGE

200 HOURS

IMPACT AWARDS

Natalie Gough

50 HOURS

IMPACT AWARDS

Sam Cross

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## Foreword

from candidate  
Mark Brashier

Hello! I'm Mark, and I'm asking for your #1 vote for NUS-USI President.

From my work in **SERC Students' Union** to my national advocacy through the **#iwill movement**, I have seen the power of student voices to drive real change. As President, I will ensure that NUS-USI is inclusive, ambitious, and accountable. To provide a united voice for every student in Northern Ireland, and to fight for our fundamental right... Education, which has been facing inflation, and underfunding which makes it hard to focus on learning and plan for the future. Especially with limited financial support, high rents, and insufficient mental health resources.

Despite Further Education students making up over half of the voting electorate within NUS-USI, we haven't had an FE President since 2011, Which is over a decade without direct FE representation at the very top of our national student movement. It's time to change that!





## PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

# My Experience:

- **Course Representative** 2023/24 - 24/25 - 25/26
- **International Students Officer** 2023/2024
- **Campus President** 2024/2025 (Member of the Union Executive Committee)
- Student Governor (**Union President**) of SERC Students' Union 2025/2026
- **Enterprise Champion** at SERC EEE
- **Ambassador** at the [#iWill Movement](#)
- **First Aider** at [St John Ambulance Northern Ireland](#)
- **Social Media Officer** at [The Youth & Politics Podcast](#)

I have built my leadership and advocacy experience through a wide range of roles in student representation, volunteering and youth leadership, giving me a strong understanding of how decisions made in boardrooms affect students on the ground in order to improve the student experience and champion learner voices across Further and Higher Education provisions within SERC.

My commitment to students has been recognised through multiple awards, including SERC Excellence Awards as Students' Union Class Rep of the Year (Bangor Campus, 2023/24) and for Excellence in Project Work (2023/24), alongside Gold SU Volunteering Awards and a 300 Hour Impact Award for volunteering, issued by Volunteer Now. In 2024/25 I was nominated for SERC Excellence Awards for Students' Union Officer of the Year and Excellence in Project Work, and received a further Gold SU Volunteering Award as well as the "Excellence in Supporting the Student Experience" volunteering award, reflecting sustained, hands-on work to make college life fairer, safer and more inclusive.





**PROTECT AND  
FUND THE FURTHER  
EDUCATION SECTOR**

Further Education (FE) plays a critical role in widening participation, reskilling adults, and supporting local economies, yet it continues to receive lower levels of recognition and investment than Higher Education (HE). Underfunding affects teaching quality, estates, student support and the ability of unions to respond to rising need.

Student representatives from across Northern Ireland have previously reported that FE unions operate with fragile budgets, short-term project funding and no statutory per-student allocation. This undermines their capacity to tackle core issues such as food poverty, discrimination and mental health, despite evidence that student representation is a protective factor against disengagement and withdrawal.

To address this, this manifesto calls for FE to be funded and valued on an equal basis with HE; for FE unions in Northern Ireland to receive statutory, ring-fenced per-student funding comparable to HE unions; and for local FE and access courses to be protected, particularly those enabling progression to work or higher study. Investment is also needed in safe and warm buildings, modern classrooms, accessible social spaces and digital infrastructure, as estates reports highlight problems with heating, maintenance and a lack of suitable communal areas.

Carers' access to education remains a significant concern: learners with caring responsibilities face timetable clashes, financial barriers and inflexible attendance policies. Local programmes such as "Our Little SERC" demonstrate how targeted support for carers can keep students in education and should be used as templates for sector-wide solutions. A voluntary cross-sector sub-committee within NUS-USI, made up of FE and HE student leaders (e.g. FE Officer, HE Officer, Equality Officer roles), could coordinate this work and support initiatives like a cross-sector FE Student Governor working group. These would provide voluntary skill building opportunities to members of all affiliated Unions in National Leadership, while not being elected in by the same NUS channels as a NUS Sabbatical Officer, but rather through a new and democratic channel for this purpose.

## What Students Think Priority SU Submission

- SERC proposes an adjustment to the income brackets for the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and Further Education (FE) Grants to better reflect the rising cost of living and ensure accessibility for students. Currently, financial support thresholds do not align with economic realities, leaving many students without the assistance they need to continue their education. Increasing the income brackets for EMA and FE Grants will enable more learners to access funding and pursue further education without undue financial strain. Furthermore, we emphasise the importance of student representation and autonomy within the Further Education sector. It is essential that Student Unions operate without undue restrictions, ensuring that they can advocate for and support students effectively. A true parity of esteem between FE and other academic pathways must extend to student representation, allowing Student Unions to function independently without concerns of institutional interference. We call for clear safeguards to protect the rights and autonomy of Student Unions within FE institutions.

# STANDARDISED FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR ALL STUDENTS

Across the UK, national surveys show that the cost-of-living crisis has led to widespread hardship among students, with around 90% reporting an impact on their mental health and large majorities cutting back on food, heating and social activity to cope. In Northern Ireland, where average incomes are lower and benefit eligibility is more restricted for students, these pressures are intensified.

### **Education Maintenance Allowance:**

The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) was introduced in 2004 as a tiered payment of £10, £20 or £30 per week, targeted at young people from low-income households to support continuation in education. The top £30 rate was originally available where household income was £20,817 or less. EMA has since been simplified to a flat rate of £30 per week, with current Northern Ireland thresholds of around £20,500 for single-child families and £22,500 for multiple-child households, which have not been fully uprated for inflation.

Using standard inflation measures, £30 in 2004 should now equate to approximately £50.38, meaning **EMA's real value has fallen by around 40%**. Similarly, the multiple-child household threshold of £22,500 would be roughly £36,600+ if adjusted for inflation, indicating a substantial real-terms tightening of eligibility. As a result, students face higher transport, food and energy costs while support has effectively shrunk.

EMA and related support measures are essentially 'stuck' in government decision-making, with the risk of withdrawal or redesign before an adequate replacement is in place. This manifesto therefore supports NUS-USI and students' unions campaigning for either retention and uprating of EMA (both payment rates and thresholds), or a reformed support system introduced only after a fully protected transition period, ensuring no gap in provision.

## **Further Education Grant:**

The Further Education (FE) Grant is a vital support for older and low-income FE learners. However, its tiered structure and income brackets have remained unchanged since 2016, despite sustained inflation in rent, transport and essential goods. Based on estimates, this would suggest a **23% real-term drop in value for both grant amounts and thresholds** over this period. Students receiving the same nominal grant now face significantly higher living costs, while some households have been pushed just above frozen thresholds and lose eligibility without any real increase in disposable income.

In this context, this manifesto calls for uprating the FE Grant's amounts and thresholds in line with inflation, aligning the FE Grants with HE maintenance support to ensure parity of esteem, and annual reviews so that support reflects current living costs for FE, HE, apprentices, part-time and Access learners.

The manifesto also highlights the need to examine how the wider benefits system interacts with student finance, using anonymised case studies (with consent) to evidence indirect harms when students or their families lose benefits on entering education.

## **Higher Education Funding:**

The 2025 Review of Higher Education Funding in Northern Ireland, developed by NUS-USI, provides the evidence base for this manifesto's stance on higher education maintenance support. That report demonstrates that the current package of grants and loans for a full-time undergraduate living away from home in Northern Ireland is worth the equivalent of only £8.67 per hour over a 30-week academic year, well below the National Living Wage of £12.21, while postgraduates receive no maintenance support and nursing students rely on a bursary of just £430 per month. NUS-USI's 2024 cost-of-living research, incorporated into the review, further shows that 84% of students are worried about money, one third of working students do more than 20 hours per week and 7% have used food banks, evidencing that current support is not meeting basic living costs.

The same NUS-USI report highlights how frozen income thresholds have compounded this crisis by placing unfair pressure on low-income families. The lower household income threshold has been stuck at £19,203 since 2009, even though NUS-USI's analysis shows that, if it had tracked inflation, it would now stand at £30,820, meaning many families on modest incomes are treated as able to contribute when they cannot reliably do so. Modelling set out in the 2025 funding review illustrates how updating these thresholds and associated grant levels to 2025 values would better target support at those who need it most and reduce the financial barriers to entering and staying in higher education.

On the basis of this evidence, the manifesto calls for reforms that directly implement NUS-USI's recommendations from the 2025 review: uprating HE maintenance grants and loans so that total support aligns with at least the National Living Wage over the period of study, with thresholds and amounts indexed annually to inflation. It also echoes the report's call to improve targeted support for students with higher costs, including student parents, carers and disabled students, and to end the exclusion of many postgraduate and nursing students from mainstream maintenance support. Finally, reflecting NUS-USI's concern with the wider policy environment, the manifesto urges government to examine how the social security system interacts with student finance, using anonymised case studies to show where students and their families lose benefits on entering higher education, so that reforms to HE funding reduce rather than deepen poverty.

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## SUPPORTING LIBERATION COLLECTIVES

National and local evidence has shown that LGBTQ+, Black, minority ethnic, disabled, international and other marginalised students experience higher rates of harassment, discrimination and financial hardship, and often report greater mental health impacts from the cost-of-living crisis. It has been reported that serious levels of homophobia, transphobia, racism and other forms of hate in Northern Ireland's FE and HE institutions, frequently perceived as worse than in other UK regions.

Liberation collectives require secure funding, staff support and recognition, alongside clearer protections in policy and law. This manifesto calls for enhanced legal and institutional protections for FE and HE liberation groups, a review and where necessary, redefinition of hate crime frameworks to reflect students' lived experiences, improved physical, digital and academic accessibility across all campuses, and better support for international students, who typically pay higher fees yet often receive limited tailored support in areas such as language, housing and immigration guidance.

A photograph of a group of students sitting at tables in a dining hall. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent orange filter. In the center, a young man with short brown hair, wearing a dark suit and a light blue shirt, is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. Behind him, several other students are visible, some looking towards the camera and others looking away. The background is slightly blurred, showing more students and tables. The overall tone is serious and focused.

**COST OF LIVING  
PROTECTIONS**

UK-wide research from NUS, ONS and the Office for Students indicates that high proportions of students have cut back on food, heating and transport, with many reporting worsened mental wellbeing and considering dropping out. NUS-USI's "Cost of Survival" work highlights that Northern Ireland students can be left with very limited disposable income after accommodation, making them reliant on part-time work, overdrafts and hardship support.

In this context, food and material poverty are no longer isolated incidents but systemic features of student life. One case study shared at the recent NUS-USI conference described the SERC SU food pantry being emptied in under two days, despite careful planning, illustrating the scale of unmet need.

This manifesto therefore proposes that funding for permanent food pantries, clothing swap shops and warm meal programmes on FE and HE campuses, including repurposing unused canteen or social spaces, affordable and accessible public transport, with discounted fares extended to rural areas where travel costs are highest, protections and fair standards in student housing, including rent controls or caps where possible, and emergency hardship funds that are easy to access and clearly communicated to prevent withdrawal due to short-term crises.

These interventions must be seen as core infrastructure for student success and not as a form of temporary charity.

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## **LIFELONG LEARNING INITIATIVE**

Policy discussions across the UK have increasingly recognised the need for flexible, lifelong access to learning to support economic transition and social mobility. However, financial and structural barriers still prevent many adults from returning to education or upskilling.

This manifesto supports a Lifelong Learning Credits model that would allow adults to retrain or upskill throughout their lives, with credits usable across colleges, universities and training providers. Financial support should follow the learner rather than being tied to a single institution or one-off qualification, and learning support should be portable through mechanisms such as a Universal Learning Support Statement.

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## **MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING**

National surveys have found that the cost-of-living crisis is closely linked to worsening student mental health, with around 90% of respondents in some NUS studies reporting an impact, and ONS data showing nearly half of students experiencing a decline in mental wellbeing since the start of term. FE students in particular report high rates of anxiety and depression linked to financial stress, caring responsibilities and insecure work.

In Northern Ireland, unions report increasing demand for counselling, wellbeing support, and assistance with complex issues such as violence against women and girls, harassment, chronic illness and disability. The complexity of these cases often exceeds existing institutional capacity.

This manifesto thereby calls for accessible mental health services in all colleges and universities, with sufficient trained counsellors and clear referral routes, general staff training to recognise early signs of distress and respond appropriately, explicit inclusion of mental health, trauma and chronic illness awareness in policy, staff development and student induction, and sustained, ring-fenced budgets for both mental health and hardship support within departmental allocations.

Improving understanding of disability and chronic illness across campuses is essential to reducing stress and preventing crisis points for many students. When staff and peers are better informed, chronically ill and disabled students face fewer barriers, fewer misunderstandings, and less pressure to constantly self-advocate. These challenges rarely exist in isolation: financial insecurity, gender-based violence, racism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism often intersect, compounding their impact on wellbeing and making access to support even more complex. Addressing mental health therefore requires an intersectional approach that recognises how these overlapping forms of disadvantage reinforce one another and tailors support accordingly.

## **Period Poverty:**

Many students still face period poverty, forced to choose between buying essential health products and other basic needs. This issue disproportionately impacts low-income students and hinders their ability to fully engage in education. I will campaign for the expansion of The Period Products (the Department for the Economy Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 Act, ensuring free period products in all Colleges, Universities and training providers as well as greater and more secure funding and enhanced privacy measures.

## **Sexual Health:**

Students continue to face barriers in accessing vital healthcare services, with international, ethnic minority, and LGBTQ+ students often struggling to find inclusive and culturally competent care. Limited access to sexual health services further restricts students' ability to look after their well-being. I will work to expand campus health provisions, ensuring free contraception, STI testing, and comprehensive sexual health education are accessible to all students.

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## HIGHER EDUCATION

# North-South Mobility

For students in Northern Ireland, North-South mobility is about being able to choose courses in the Republic of Ireland on an equal footing with peers elsewhere, but current systems make that far harder than it should be. Barriers in admissions, finance and information combine to make studying in the South feel risky or confusing rather than a normal, supported option for NI learners.

## **Admissions and points gaps:**

The biggest structural issue is the gap between the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and the Central Applications Office (CAO) system, especially how A-level grades are translated into CAO points and how differently offers are timed. NI pupils progressing through A-levels often find that the CAO points they receive do not fully reflect the strength of their results, or that they are expected to carry an additional subject to be competitive, which is not always feasible in already pressured timetables. The result is that high-achieving students may still perceive CAO applications as a gamble compared with more straightforward UCAS offers.

The timing of offers further skews decisions for NI students as UCAS conditional and then confirmed offers typically arrive earlier in the cycle, while CAO decisions can come later, forcing pupils to choose between securing a place in the UK or holding out for a possibility in the South. This creates a practical disincentive to apply through CAO at all, particularly for first-generation and working-class applicants who may not feel able to risk losing a guaranteed local or UK place.

## **Information, guidance and support:**

Careers education and guidance in many NI schools and colleges are primarily built around the UCAS system, with CAO treated as a specialist route which would only see a few students pursue each year. That means pupils frequently receive far less structured support with CAO deadlines, personal choices and accommodation planning, and instead relying on ad hoc advice or their own online research. Rural schools and FE colleges can be especially affected, as staff have limited capacity to maintain up-to-date expertise on two different national systems.

For NI learners considering studying in the South, this information gap extends into the transition itself, where navigating different academic calendars as well as the recognition of qualifications, and the practicalities of living in another jurisdiction is often left to individual students and families. This amplifies existing inequalities, as those with family experience of higher education or cross-border work are better positioned to interpret and manage the complexity than those without that social background.

## **Financial and welfare barriers:**

From Northern Ireland, finances are a central concern for cross-border study. Students must weigh up different regimes for tuition, grants and loans, as well as substantial cost-of-living differences between cities such as Belfast, Derry/Londonderry and Dublin. With limited clarity over eligibility for maintenance support, healthcare entitlements and welfare, this creates anxiety, particularly for disabled students, carers and those from low-income households who cannot rely on family safety nets if something goes wrong.

These financial uncertainties make cross-border routes feel like a privilege for those with savings or family backing, rather than a mainstream option for NI learners who might otherwise benefit from unique courses or placements available only in the Republic of Ireland. In practice, this means talented NI students can be locked out of all-island opportunities or pushed into choices driven by affordability rather than genuine interest or aptitude.

## **What needs to change for NI students:**

From a Northern Ireland perspective, tackling the issue of North-South mobility is about removing borders in information, process and support. This manifesto therefore calls for:

- A joint, student-friendly information and guidance platform aimed specifically at NI schools and colleges, clearly mapping CAO and UCAS routes, deadlines and equivalences.
- Fair, transparent and regularly reviewed grade and points conversion between A-levels and the Leaving Certificate, developed with input from NI students, teachers and admissions experts, with collaboration from respective counterparts in the South.
- Better co-ordination of offer timelines and communication so NI applicants are not penalised for exploring both CAO and UCAS options.
- Dedicated cross-border bursaries, housing and travel support for NI students who study in the South, with clear guidance on grants, loans, welfare and healthcare entitlements.

By approaching the issue of North-South mobility from the lived reality of Northern Ireland students, these changes would ensure that crossing the border for education becomes a realistic, supported choice rather than a high-risk exception.

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## STATEMENTS OF PRINCIPLE, SAFETY & INCLUSION

I will stand firmly for fairness, safety, and respect in every learning environment. I will actively support the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls initiative, ensuring its principles are fully embedded in campus policies and culture. I will uphold the APPG on British Muslims' definition of Islamophobia and champion anti-racism as central to my values. I will adopt and promote the IHRA definition of Antisemitism to safeguard the rights and wellbeing of Jewish students. Furthermore, I will commit to sustainability by reducing waste and investing in green campus initiatives that support environmental responsibility and long-term ecological health.

- <https://appgbritishmuslims.org/publications>
- <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/working-definition-antisemitism?focus=antisemitismandholocaustdenial>

### **Commuter, rural and part-time students:**

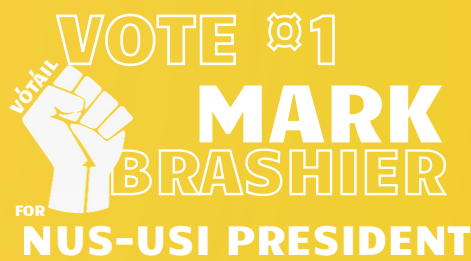
Commuter, rural, part-time, and distance learning students face unique challenges from long travel times and poor public transport to limited access to campus life and services. While transport costs are a major concern, these groups also need tailored representation and support to ensure they are fully included in student life. I will work to strengthen recognition of their distinct needs within NUS-USI policy and advocate for better support and infrastructure for all non-residential students.

## **Digital poverty, safety and learning infrastructure:**

Following established guidance, institutions should draw on frameworks like the 5Rights Foundation to create safe, private and rights-respecting digital learning environments, and embed equality and anti-oppression training for staff and student leaders as part of everyday practice. This means treating digital spaces as core learning environments, not optional add-ons, with clear responsibilities around safety, privacy, inclusion and power dynamics online as well as on campus.

Universities and students' unions in Northern Ireland consistently highlight that meaningful participation in higher education now depends on reliable access to devices, software, Wi-Fi and high-quality virtual learning environments, including captioning, lecture capture and other accessibility tools. Digital poverty from lack of a suitable device to unaffordable data or poor connectivity must therefore be understood as a structural barrier to learning, not an individual failing.

A comprehensive approach should commit to tackling digital inequality across FE and HE together, ensuring that every learner can access safe, inclusive and accessible digital learning spaces regardless of income, disability or location.



This manifesto was developed and edited by Mark Brashier, Student Governor of South Eastern Regional College Students' Union.

This manifesto outlines core items I would fight to change if elected. I do acknowledge that there are many other areas which require attention including Health Care Professionals (HCP) Fees & Funding, Student Accommodation, Irish Language, Warm meals with grant funding, and many more issues not stated and ones which will arise over the two years as NUS-USI president, which I will be ready to tackle!

Thank You for your trust and consideration

In Solidarity,

**Mark Brashier** (He/Him)  
**Student Governor** of SERC Students' Union  
**Candidate** for NUS-USI President

## Campaign Site:

<https://markbrashier-nus-usi.carrd.co/>

**Please get in contact if you have any questions or would like to chat – I would love to hear from you!**



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