



TELLING

THE REAL STORY.

STUDENT ACCOMMODATION
Survey findings

Rose Conway-Walsh TD

Sinn Féin spokesperson on Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science



FOREWORD

In these unprecedented times, students and their families have been asked to shoulder far too much, both mentally and monetarily. Sinn Féin believes that it is the role of government to provide citizens with sufficient safeguards. Unfortunately, when it comes to student accommodation, few protections have been forthcoming.

The Sinn Féin Student Accommodation Survey 2020 was carried out in October prior to the month-end shift to Covid-19 Level 5. The objective was to learn what students have been experiencing with regard to attaining suitable and affordable accommodation on or near their third-level institution. We also queried their expectations of what they thought the 'blended learning' world would look and feel like. The results reveal a very broken landscape.

Students have been gouged for large sums of money upfront by private landlords who did not give refunds during the first lockdown and seem unlikely to willingly do so now. Some educational institutions have also, thus far, not offered refunds for the 2020/21 academic year for those who paid in advance for on-campus accommodation.

More than 58% of the renting students surveyed paid over €1,000 in advance. Students and their families cannot afford to be left holding the bag to keep landlord profitable through the Covid-19 response. It is not their role to fund the gap for landlords and institutions by paying for products and services that they will not use. Government needs to step in here and make this right.

It is very clear that accommodation is – and has been for many years - a barrier to students embracing their learning environment without excessive financial burdens and challenges. This should not be allowed to continue.

Third-level education has now shifted to a setting of screens and social distancing. Engagement on campus with friends is gone and this has caused feelings of isolation for many. Over a third don't expect to step foot on campus at all. Some are facing difficult and possibly abusive home situations. It is our role as public representatives to spearhead programmes that will somehow normalise their lives.

Technology deprivation adds to the stress in many cases.

Access to broadband is not universal and solutions are required to fill that gap. Additionally, easier access to up-to-date hardware and software is needed for those who cannot afford to purchase on their own.

Despite all of the changes and sacrifices, the expensive backdrop of registration fees remains. Students are wondering why they are asked to pay the full amount for a non-existent campus life and a 100% online learning environment.

The insights gained through this survey allow us to understand the resilience and the frailties of our student population. Sinn Féin truly wants to help them get the best possible educational experience from this fraught and ever-changing reality.



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KEY FINDINGS

- ⚠ Students are in a unique position in the rental market as they are often asked to pay rent months in advance.
- ⚠ Students secured accommodation based on assurances from the government and institutes of higher education.
- ⚠ More than 58% of all student surveyed have paid more than 1000 euro upfront for accommodation.
- ⚠ Students reported their courses were on average more than 80% online - prior to the move to a state-wide level 5.
- ⚠ 35% of students said they expected their courses to be completely online - prior to the move to a state-wide level 5.
- ⚠ Majority of students rent in the private market.
- ⚠ Many students and families have taken on debt to afford student accommodation.
- ⚠ Students feel they were misled into securing accommodation.
- ⚠ Lack of connectivity in parts of the country forces students to find accommodation even though their courses have moved online.
- ⚠ Students with difficult home lives have struggled to secure accommodation they can afford due to reduced employment opportunities.

REQUIRED ACTION

- ➔ **All universities and associated accommodation providers must be instructed to allow for leases to be terminated and provide full-refunds for any student that request one.**
- ➔ **The government must ensure that institutes of higher education are financially supported in providing accommodation refunds.**
- ➔ **The government must ensure all leases can be ended early without incurring any fee or penalty and that all deposits and advanced rent paid to private accommodation providers is refunded to students.**
- ➔ **The Government must empower the Residential Tenancies Board to ensure compliance.**
- ➔ **The Residential Tenancies Board must be provided with adequate financial resources and staff to ensure complaints are processed in a timely manner.**
- ➔ **Explore the possibility of using on-campus accommodation for students with no internet connectivity at home.**
- ➔ **Explore the possibility of using on-campus accommodation for students facing abusive situations at home through a referral from front line services.**

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Student Accommodation - Survey findings

Students Renting Accommodation				Private		Campus		Upfront Accommodation Payment											
								1-500		501-1000		1001-2000		2001-4999		5000 plus		No figure provided	
3rd-Level Institution Location	247		100%	181	73%	65	26%	42	17%	50	20%	47	19%	85	34%	13	5%	10	4%
Dublin	51	21%	27%	33	65%	18	35%	9	18%	7	14%	7	14%	22	43%	2	4%	4	8%
East (not Dublin)	15	6%		6	40%	9	60%	4	27%	1	7%	1	7%	8	53%	1	7%	0	0%
Southeast	9		4%	8	89%	1	11%	1	11%	6	67%	2	22%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Cork	29	12%	22%	23	79%	6	21%	4	14%	9	31%	4	14%	9	31%	3	10%	0	0%
Limerick	26	11%		19	73%	7	27%	4	15%	7	27%	7	27%	8	31%	0	0%	0	0%
NUIG	83	34%	40%	65	78%	18	22%	13	16%	16	19%	14	17%	29	35%	7	8%	4	5%
West (not NUIG)	17	7%		13	76%	3	18%	4	24%	2	12%	7	41%	3	18%	0	0%	1	6%
Northwest	17		7%	14	82%	3	18%	3	18%	2	12%	5	29%	6	35%	0	0%	1	6%

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Student Accomodation - Survey findings

All Students Surveyed				Expected weekly on-campus hours?										What % of your course is online?
				Zero		5 or less		6 to 10		Over 10		Don't Know/Other		
3rd-Level Institution Location	329		100%	116	35%	119	36%	38	12%	44	13%	13	4%	82%
Dublin	81	25%	31%	34	42%	25	31%	10	12%	12	15%	1	1%	86%
East (not Dublin)	20	6%		4	20%	10	50%	1	5%	5	25%	0	0%	83%
Southeast	14		4%	9	64%	1	7%	1	7%	3	21%	0	0%	89%
Cork	32	10%	20%	13	41%	9	28%	6	19%	3	9%	1	3%	83%
Limerick	35	11%		13	37%	9	26%	6	17%	3	9%	4	11%	80%
NUIG	102	31%	36%	32	31%	51	50%	5	5%	8	8%	6	6%	83%
West (not NUIG)	17	5%		4	24%	4	24%	4	24%	5	29%	0	0%	71%
Northwest	28		9%	7	25%	10	36%	5	18%	5	18%	1	4%	75%

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Student Accommodation - Survey findings

All Students Surveyed				# with Comments	% with Comments	Accommodation € Complaints		Issues with Courses Online	
ALL	329		100%	155	47%	86	55%	58	37%
Dublin	80	24%	30%	43	54%	24	56%	16	37%
East (not Dublin)	20	6%		3	15%	1	33%	2	67%
Southeast	14		4%	6	43%	3	50%	2	33%
Cork	32	10%	20%	20	63%	12	60%	10	50%
Limerick	35	11%		16	46%	10	63%	4	25%
NUIG	102	31%	36%	42	41%	23	55%	14	33%
West (not NUIG)	17	5%		10	59%	4	40%	6	60%
Northwest	28		9%	15	54%	9	60%	4	27%

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IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"I regret paying for accommodation. I signed a lease for 8 months, so I can't get out of it. I think it was deliberate planning by the government and third level institutions not to inform students until the Friday evening before starting college about going online."

"It's ridiculous for the government to turn around and ask us to reconsider if we need to rent accommodation for college at this stage when so many of us have already paid thousands of euro and signed leases."

"2 days after I moved in we were told it would be completely online for 2 weeks, and then today we were informed that it would be online for the rest of the semester. The whole situation has been so stressful and upsetting."

"They made sure we paid our accommodation first before telling us we could study from home."

"The university told us to get accommodation. Then on the first week told us that we are mostly online, and all lectures will be recorded. I have paid rent since July to secure a room and now cannot get out of my lease."

"I did not receive a refund for months I couldn't live in my accommodation from March on as I had prepaid. I don't expect I will get a refund for my current accommodation if things go the same way."

"I hope that if we are put into level 5 lockdown we'll be sent home and our accommodation will be refunded."



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Student Accommodation - Survey findings



"College lecturers aren't taking us for all the class time that is provided on the timetable, for example, I should have one of my modules for 4 hours a week but the lecturer over the module is only giving us 1 hour a week. This is what concerns me. We are obviously given the 4 hours for a reason, but we aren't getting them."

"I found out one week into my lease that the course is online following the government's guidelines. No reduction in fees or cost has been offered. It's just unfair."

"I already had my accommodation when they decided to put everything online. Now I don't know if I should give up the room or wait until we are back on campus. Stuck in limbo!"

"The landlady is putting pressure on me big time to pay upfront in order to secure the room. Which is totally unacceptable."

"I have worked all summer and last summer to be able to afford student accommodation and now I don't even need it."

"The university told me to get accommodation and that my course would be mostly on campus due to labs. Now its 100% online until January. I can now kiss goodbye to €800 on accommodation."

"Online lectures and practicals are just are not working. The lecturers have been thrown into this mess as much a us, and as a student it's really clear that they have not been prepared and trained for online learning. 8 of my lectures were cancelled this week because lecturers were not able to use the technology."





"Renting privately in student accommodation block. I was left with no option but to book accommodation. I am travelling home each weekend to work to help pay for this accommodation which realistically I don't need if only we were advised by the college on time."

"I personally feel as though the universities were over-promising when it came to how many hours of face-to-face teaching that they could provide under the current circumstances. Also, I believe that the universities were far too late in providing students with their timetables resulting in students signing leases for accommodation that they would rarely need."

"Student Accommodation exploits students. It shows where the priorities of those who are supposed to help us lie. I am let down by every housing minister, Taoiseach and TD who has allowed housing and student accommodation to continue this way."

"I am a parent of a daughter who is a first-year student going to University. We felt under so much pressure about the accommodation because our deadline was the 14th Sept and CAO offers were the 11th. We were unsure at the time whether or not it would be remote learning. The following week the announcement was made everything was to go online. This was so frustrating. We couldn't get a grant so it wasn't easy and now we have until the 4th Dec before we pay another €3.400 which again is another burden."

"Student rentals are a joke, way too overpriced. How are young people supposed to get started if we are being hammered with high prices, debts, high interest rates, etc?"

"Students were only told about everything being online after paying for accommodation, some even taking out loans to do so. Students need more support."

"Students should not be expected to pay for accommodation they are not using. The requirement to pay a big lump sum upfront is crippling."



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Student Accommodation - Survey findings



"My final year of college being carried out online is not good as I feel it will affect the result I get, thus affecting my final degree."

"There's a worry that if there's a lockdown and we have to move home we'll lose all the money paid for the accommodation. Especially for first years I think it's very hard to settle into a new place when you're online. It's a struggle to make friends and it can be very lonely. The only people you're coming in contact with are your housemates. College is a place where you're meant to make new friends and find your groups whereas now it's a lonely place and it can be hard to find someone to talk to as you're sitting looking at names on a screen and not seeing faces. Support needs to be better advertised for students especially after the unprecedented leaving cert year that even after the results and offers we're still not having a clear straightforward answer."

"As I live in Mayo I can't commute three times per week as they have spaced my face-to-face sessions on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Is that deliberate to ensure I have to take up the accommodation?"

"There is so much uncertainty and having paid my accommodation I am liable for another 3 grand. I took out a loan to pay for this as I was directed by my university that we would be on campus to a large extent. I have no protection now."

"I'm finding it really hard to not be able to socialise and meet new friends. Would even love to be able to go into some in-person classes to meet other people in my course. I might stay at home until Covid-19 calms down in Dublin but I feel bad not using the room after paying so much for it. It's a real mess."

"There's a worry that if we've to move home we'll lose all the money paid for the accommodation. "





"At present we are working online through Zoom lectures I have been home as we were told that we would be online until we are instructed otherwise. Rent was paid up until May for academic year 19/20 for roughly 12 weeks where accommodation fees were paid in full during the lockdown period."

"This year has been nothing but a disaster so far. Stuck paying for accommodation after we were promised on-campus hours. Now we are fully online."

"Was left completely last minute to let us know whether we would be on campus or not to the point where I only moved into my accommodation two weeks ago and I'm already having to move home and request a refund after having to take out a loan to pay for it in the first place."

"Was told we were going to be on campus a lot more than we are. Wouldn't have gotten accommodation had university been upfront and said we were not going to be on campus."

"I have moved from Donegal to Carlow and I am paying rent when it would have been possible to work from home."

"I'm fortunate enough to be able to live with my parents during this time, although due to bus route cuts that doesn't exactly make it easier. However, I believe that due to the majority of our coursework being online, it's ridiculous for universities to charge the full €3000 student fee."

"Blended learning doesn't work. Students and their parents have been scammed by the government, who should have just announced during the summer that college was going to be online this year, rather than deceive students into securing accommodation just to end up watching their lectures on Zoom every day."



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"Blended learning is obviously needed right now but paying 3000€ fees for online college and no access to campus is a kick in the teeth."

"Get fibre to rural communities and then we can be educated and work from home. The network plan doesn't bring broadband to many places and if it does it's not until after August 2021!"

"Had to move to student accommodation as my WIFI at home would not accommodate online-learning."

"Have been unable to take up accommodation as last week all learning went online. Internet is very bad where I live."

"Online learning is not the same or close to being the same as in person. All my lectures have had really bad technical issues."

"I have 2 days on campus between now and Christmas. I have been refused a grant from SUSI. As a result, I will be forced to move back home with my mother, much further away from DCU. I am immunocompromised and so am fearful of taking public transport."

"My mother is paying for accommodation and I am at home in my bedroom, no refund."

"Paying thousands for an online PowerPoint isn't good enough. On accommodation, I'm the same as the majority- paid for my accommodation when we were told we'd have 20 hours on campus, then told after we all paid that I have 2 hours. Landlord refusing to be in any way flexible, I've been blindly robbed."





“Research only PhD student. My partner is doing a diploma fully online. We pay 1050e a month for an apartment which does not provide the space for independent study, never mind two people independently studying and doing online classes.”

“There needs to be a long-term plan for the academic year. ”

“All monies paid up until Christmas- timetable didn't come out until nearly 2 weeks after deadline for accommodation... will I be liable to pay for next term if I'm not there?”



GENERAL INFORMATION ON TENANCY AND LEASES

LEASES

As things currently stand, if students sign a lease together with other people, you each become responsible for all the rent. So, if your fellow tenants cannot pay their share of the rent, you may be legally liable for the entire amount. If you sign a lease on your own on behalf of the other tenants, you become responsible for all the rent.

Many students are on fixed-term leases

FIXED-TERM TENANCY

A fixed-term tenancy is an agreement that covers a specific amount of time. Can range from as little as 6 months up to a year or more.

If a private landlord refuses to consent to an assignment or sub-let of the tenancy, you can terminate the tenancy under Section 186 of the Residential Tenancies Act 2004.

In general, you get security of tenure after 6 months

ENDING A FIXED-TERM TENANCY

Students may be liable for any rent due until the end of your fixed term. Any guarantor – normally a parent – can be pursued for the money if it isn't paid or if rent is paid in advance the refunds may be refused.

PERIODIC TENANCY

A periodic tenancy agreement does not specify a fixed length of time. The period of the tenancy may be weekly or monthly, depending on how often the rent is due.

As a tenant, you can end the periodic tenancy at any time. You do not have to give a reason.

REQUIRED NOTICE PERIODS

You must give your landlord the following amount of notice when ending a tenancy.

LENGTH OF TENANCY

Required period of notice by tenant:

» Less than 6 months	=	4 weeks (28 days)
» 6 months or longer but less than 1 year	=	5 weeks (35 days)
» 1 year or longer but less than 2 years	=	6 weeks (42 days)
» 2 years or longer but less than 4 years	=	8 weeks (56 days)
» 4 years or longer but less than 8 years	=	12 weeks (84 days)
» 8 years or longer	=	16 weeks (112 days)

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT THE RESIDENTIAL TENANCIES BOARD:

- » Call between 9am to 5pm 0818 30 30 37 01-702 8100.
- » Information for Student Specific Accommodation, please email ssa@rtb.ie
- » Information about Dispute Resolution, applying for Dispute Resolution or a dispute case, please email disputes@rtb.ie



RENTAL AGREEMENT

