



Palestine Emergency Response Working Group

Report to the President

4 September 2024

Introduction

In May 2024, University College Cork set up an Emergency Response Working Group, as one of a number of commitments to support the education of Palestinian students and scholars displaced or at risk as a result of the conflict in Gaza. The aim of the Group was to report to the President on a programme of work to address the immediate educational needs of Palestinian students and scholars displaced or at risk and examine how UCC can provide support. The work of the Group took place against the backdrop of critical and urgent need in Gaza and taking account of the University of Sanctuary framework.

Membership, Meetings and Terms of Reference

Membership of the Group was constituted in line with the Terms of Reference (see Appendix A) and included representation from students - the Students' Union executive and the UCC BDS group, staff – a nominee from the Together4Palestine group and academic staff with particular expertise – as well as members with particular knowledge of the areas of EDI, UCC's access programme, student welfare and the University of Sanctuary. The group met five times over the course of May and June 2024 (see Appendix B) and a note of each meeting and accompanying documentation was shared via a share point folder. Several members assisted the work of the Group by documenting, researching, making inquiries and liaising with key internal and external stakeholders throughout the process and a report of all the actions undertaken was presented at every meeting (and is documented in the meeting reports) or where necessary was provided via email by the Chair. While these actions are not set out in this report, they fully inform the Report's recommendations.

Aims of this Report

In line with the Terms of Reference, this report presents to the President a proposed programme of work to include recommendations, owners and a clear timeline for completion. As set out in the Terms of Reference, the President may choose either to follow the proposed programme of work, to task the Palestine Emergency Working Group to continue its implementation or assign the work to another responsible body in which case the represented bodies on the Working Group should be updated on its progress via the usual University channels. Where possible, the work should be informed by the approach of the University's Ukraine Emergency Response Group and it should be capable of replication.

This report, which is intended to be publicly available, addresses the three categories of actions set out in the Terms of Reference as follows:

- a. Supports for Palestinian students and academics
- b. National advocacy for greater state supports for displaced Palestinian students and scholars and
- c. The development of Palestinian studies at UCC.

Supports for Palestinian students and academics

The Group made a number of important observations with respect to the supports that UCC should put in place for Palestinian students and academics.

First, the Group is very aware of the acute needs of students and academics displaced by the conflict and considers that the supports provided must focus on those of most urgent need, ie those currently in and displaced from Gaza. While the importance of ensuring a robust and fair process in the award of any scholarship was acknowledged, it was considered more important at this stage to act swiftly so that some supports are in place for the 24/25 academic year.

Second, the University already provides a range of supports and scholarships under the University of Sanctuary programme, including scholarships for language and short courses with the Language Centre and ACE, and a number of undergraduate Sanctuary Scholarships which offer fees and bursaries. It is important to leverage the experience of the Sanctuary programme which has experienced challenges ensuring the students receive the most appropriate supports. In addition, the current situation presents further and even more distinct challenges. For instance, Sanctuary Scholars are already in Ireland and have accommodation (albeit in direct provision). Students displaced from Gaza, by contrast, may not have a visa to enter Ireland, will not have housing and may be severely traumatised. These factors require that students displaced from Gaza receive both greater and more specific types of support. Together, this points to the limited suitability of the Sanctuary model to this context, suggesting that a new humanitarian or emergency response

scholarship may need to be developed. Students could play an important role here, acting as buddies through the application and arrival process.

Third, it is important to ensure that the supports and scholarships offered by UCC meet the need of students and scholars displaced as a result of the conflict. Their cultural appropriateness is important as well as their practical benefits and it is key, therefore, to hear directly from those who need support. Engagement with specialist organisations, with whom UCC has already had contact, and with the Palestinian community in Cork is very important to ensure that our response is appropriate and effective. Having a one stop shop for these supports – which are not currently in one place – would be useful. Once fully costed, a single budget line would provide both clarity and certainty.

Fourth, learning from the Ukraine experience, both government support and a consistent approach across the sector is strongly preferable. UCC is well placed to learn from the experience of other Irish Universities in this area and to promote proactive co-ordinated work through the IUA as far as possible.

Finally, there would appear to be little focus nationally on the scholars at risk (SAR) programme. Listening to those with experience of the SAR programme, the level of administrative, academic and pastoral support should not be underestimated. At the same time, UCC is well placed to lead in this area, leveraging an existing research programme in the region.

National Advocacy

The importance of campaigning for greater government supports for displaced students and scholars was recognised by the Group. The recognition by Government of the State of Palestine was considered to provide further impetus in this regard. While members representing specific constituencies or interests are free to lobby government for specific measures of support, and for a human rights approach, it was agreed that any commitment to advocacy for displaced students should be sustained and prolonged. It was also supported by the Group that the University should leverage its role in the IUA to advocate

for comprehensive state supports for Palestinian students similar to those received by Ukrainian students.

This advocacy could take place by

- building consensus in the IUA across the Council (Presidents), and the relevant groups representing the Registrars, the VPs Global and the EDI directors.
- Undertaking to raise the matter with DFHERIS through formal and informal dialogue
- Ensuring the issue is on the agenda of the Higher Education Authority and other relevant government departments.
- Ensuring that the issues remain on the agenda of the Sanctuary and SAR networks nationally and where possible internationally.

Palestinian Studies/Academic Engagement

There was interest in the Group for promoting greater awareness and understanding of Palestinian studies, including culture and history, through a process of academic engagement. A brief survey highlighted limited expertise in UCC, and identified some specialist expertise across the Irish university sector in a range of disciplines. It was highlighted however that the medium to long term goal must be to offer support to rebuilding universities in Gaza while also strengthening collaboration with universities in the West Bank. It was considered important that resources should be directed towards supporting educational institutions in Palestine directly.

A range of ideas were discussed including:

- The establishment of a Centre for Palestinian studies – it was recognised that specialist expertise in critical mass would be required for a centre.
- Student interest in a universal module on Palestinian studies.
- A national network of Palestinian Studies, to be led by UCC if possible, building on those in other areas (eg Latin American Studies), recognising the special relationship between Palestine and Ireland.
- Partnerships with Palestinian Universities to build on existing areas of collaboration, extending out to other disciplines.

- Encouraging incorporation of Palestinian partners into Erasmus Plus proposals, with the exploring of new research opportunities.
- Opportunities for engagement which are creative and include short- and long-term opportunities such as reading groups, workshops and network building.
- A seminar series bringing together Ireland based and Palestine based scholars, either in person or online.
- University support for these initiatives is important.

Recommendations

In conclusion, and taking full account of the above considerations and priorities, the following high level recommendations are presented for the President's consideration (with proposed owner and timeline in italics):

1. Efforts should be made to make existing supports and scholarships under the University of Sanctuary Programme available to students displaced from or currently residing in Gaza.

➤ *Vice President Global Engagement, Sept 2024.*

2. A dedicated Humanitarian Scholarship programme should be established funded from philanthropy and additional, dedicated government funding, covering fees, accommodation and supports for Palestinian students. This could be part of a wider Humanitarian or Emergency Response plan.

➤ *Vice President Global Engagement, Jan 2025*

3. Give consideration to establishing a scholar at risk programme at UCC to accommodate three to four displaced Palestinian scholars for academic year 24/25 linked with UCC's research priorities and with the aim to increase capacity in future terms.

➤ *Vice President Global Engagement, Sept 2024*

4. A group should be established and provided with some seed funding to support a programme of academic engagement, including a seminar series for Autumn 2024 involving and where possible led by Palestinian academics and other network building opportunities between Ireland and Palestinian academic institutions. All opportunities for collaboration should be actively explored and supported with consideration being given to UCC leading a national network in this area.

➤ *VP Research and Innovation, Sept 2024*

5. UCC members on the IUA should formally advocate for comprehensive state supports for Palestinian students with government and state bodies that have responsibility for higher education and related policy. This should include advocating to improve the material conditions of students within Ireland on issues such as housing, cost of living, and racism and discrimination. This should be a part of a broader policy of whole-person support, recognizing the interconnected nature of these issues and how they impact students.

➤ *VP Global Engagement and Deputy*

President and Registrar, September 2024

Conclusion

These recommendations represent a concrete step in the delivery of the University's commitments to the support of displaced Gaza students and scholars and the building of institutional ties and academic relationships between UCC and Palestinian universities. I am grateful to all the members of the Working Group for giving their time, knowledge and experience to our work over the last two months and I look forward to working further with the wider University community to ensure the achievement of our collective goals.

Professor Ursula Kilkelly

Vice President Global Engagement

Chair, Palestine Emergency Response Working Group

4 September 2024

Appendix A

Palestine Emergency Response Working Group Terms of Reference

This Task and Finish Working Group has been set up as part of the University's response to the conflict in Gaza, in order to identify and implement the emergency measures required to support the education of Palestinian students and scholars displaced or at risk. It is part of a wider series of actions committed to by the University, as part of our engagement with the Student's Union and other stakeholders. This work takes place in the context of UCC's status as a University of Sanctuary.

Aims

This Working Group has been set up to develop a report to the President that will contain a programme of work which will set out UCC's response to the ongoing crisis in Palestine, by addressing the immediate educational needs of Palestinian students and Palestinian scholars displaced or at risk and examine how UCC can support those.

Membership

- Vice President Global Engagement - Professor Ursula Kilkelly, (Chair)
- SU President – Colm Foley, then Katie Halpin-Hill
- SU Executive Officer - Hayley O'Connell Vaughan, Communications and Engagement Officer
- Nominees from UCC BDS (two students) – Morgan Hegarty and Mikey Rose, then Ainsley Kay Rucker
- Nominee from Together4Palestine (staff) – Dr Laurence Davis
- Nominee from EDI – Dr Avril Hutch
- Nominee from UCC Sanctuary – Dr Angela Flynn, Chair, Sanctuary Working Group
- Nominees from UCC Student Experience – Paul Moriarty and Olive Byrne
- Academic nominees with relevant expertise – Dr Mohammed Owaineh and Dr Ali Khasan.

Scope

The Working Group will consider how best UCC can support Palestinian students and scholars who are displaced or at risk as a result of the conflict, including but not limited to:

- b. Identifying means to support Palestinian students and academics to continue study and research at UCC, such as:
 - i. Consideration of whether the existing Sanctuary Scholarships can be used to support displaced Palestinian students
 - ii. Consideration of using the Scholars at Risk Programme for displaced scholars
 - iii. Consideration of other opportunities to support Palestinian students and scholars displaced, e.g. the implementation of a separate scholarship scheme with ring fenced funding, for a set number of years with administrative support.
- d. Undertake urgent and focused advocacy at a national level, including via the IUA Council and the VP Global Group, for greater state supports for displaced Palestinian students and scholars.
- c. Consider the development of Palestinian studies at UCC, through the development of international partnerships with Palestinian universities and a programme of academic engagement - seminars, lectures - related to Palestine.

Timeline

Meetings will be held at least every two weeks, in line with the urgency and importance of its work.

Task and Finish

At the end of June 2024, or on the completion of the Group's work, a report will be prepared for the President. This report will focus on how UCC can best support those displaced due to the crisis, and will propose a programme of work to include recommendations that are made available publicly, with the view of preventing ambiguity and ensuring transparency and accountability in implementation. This programme of work should also outline responsible parties, and a clear timeline for the completion of this initial work. On the basis of this report, and in order to fulfil the University's commitments in this area, the President may choose to decide whether to follow the proposed programme of work, and whether the Group should continue, be integrated into another body or be discontinued. If discontinued,

the responsible party for the implementation of the programme of work should be made clear, and regular progress reports provided to the represented bodies on the Working Group via the University channels.

Appendix B

Schedule of Meetings

20 May 2024

27 May 2024

11 June 2024

17 June 2024

26 June 2024