

Policy name: **Universal Credit**Date Presented: **27/05/20**Lapse Date: **May 2024****STUDENT COUNCIL NOTES:**

Universal Credit (UC) was introduced to NI as part of the Welfare Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2015. Its main purpose was to replace "legacy" benefits. These were each claimed separately. UC replaced these with a single application form. Applications are made online, with the successful claim also being managed online by the individual and Department for Communities (DfC) staff. Eligible claimants must be 18 to State Pension age. Although most students cannot claim UC, some may be eligible, which includes disabled students and those with caring responsibilities. Other benefits that students may claim include Personal Independence Payments (PIP), which may help them meet costs associated with disability. These are claimed separately and depend on the individual's circumstances. This amended policy seeks to provide an update to the original version, which was passed by UUSU Student Council in 2019/20.

**STUDENT COUNCIL BELIEVES:**

UC and other benefits continue to be an area of controversy for students. Recent changes to policy may exacerbate issues for eligible people. While the 2019/20 Universal Credit Policy focused on full-time Undergraduate students, new information has come to light about others. With regard to full-time Undergraduate students, it remains that some student support is counted by DfC as income. Therefore, UC claims are reduced to take this into consideration and amounts may be substantial. Full-time Postgraduate students are not subject to these deductions at present, as most can only receive a Tuition Fee Loan from the Student Loans Company. However, part-time students are treated at the discretion of DfC staff with whom they have regular contact. Part-time students may be required to seek additional paid work. Failure to do so may result in sanctions being applied to claims. It must be recognised that those studying part-time may not have the ability to seek additional work due to their personal circumstances. As of December 2021, prospective students who do not have "Limited Capability for Work" (as decided via medical assessment) will not be eligible to claim UC while they study. This is particularly detrimental to younger disabled students, who may not be able to undertake study due to financial reasons.

**STUDENT COUNCIL BELIEVES CONTINUED:**

In addition to these challenges, students are generally considered to be complex cases. This means that their claims are subject to periodic review by DfC staff. It also means that award amounts may be calculated manually, both subject to potential error and with no way for individuals to confirm that they are receiving the correct amounts. Claimants may continue to be subject to meetings with their "Work Coach," which may cause more stress and have a negative impact on their wellbeing.

Other benefits including PIP may be subject to lengthy applications, long waiting times for decisions, and have high rejection rates. For those whose claims are rejected, the appeals process can be extremely long, require a large amount of evidence gathering, and is extremely complicated. Although decisions may be overturned, this is very difficult to achieve without specialist input.

While recognising the services of UUSU Advice Bureau, the current provision for supporting individuals claiming UC and other benefits at the University is lacking. There needs to be joined-up provision for eligible students, who may also be considered vulnerable, to ensure that all of the information and assistance they need is available.

**STUDENT COUNCIL RESOLVES:**

- UUSU must continue to lobby for increased support for members who are eligible to claim or are in receipt of state benefits.
- Research should be conducted to establish how many students are likely to require additional support and identify areas of need. Relevant campaigns based on these results, including "stop and scrap" should be considered.
- The Student Voice must be fed into discussions relating directly to student eligibility and issues at all levels.
- UUSU should facilitate events such as "Benefit Clinics," seeking to raise awareness of individual eligibility for and support with making/managing claims and appeals. Such events should include independent advice from specialist organisations.

Name of Proposer: *Colette Ansell*

Name of Seconder: *Amy Merron*

*Policy renewed on the 26th April 2023*