**Petition No. P00043/12 – Concerning the current eligibility criteria for the Back To Education Allowance Scheme (BTEA).**

I would like to thank the Chairman and committee members of the Joint sub-Committee on Public Petitions for the opportunity to discuss the current eligibility criteria for the Back To Education Allowance Scheme (BTEA). At present an individual on jobseekers Benefit needs to be receiving payments for 9 months (234 days) or longer in order to qualify for the Back To Education Allowance Scheme.

In 2004, the criteria for receiving the BTEA was 6 months (156 days) and this was in a time of high employment. This suggests that there is flexibility with regard to the length of time an individual is unemployed to qualify for the BTEA. On Wednesday 12 May 2010 at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Social and Family Affairs ( Oireachtas .ie Archives) , a representative of the Department of Social Protection stated that, and I quote: ‘ The imposition of a waiting period serves to minimise the deadweight element’, end quote. The inference being that doing a third level course may be easier to being unemployed and receiving Jobseekers Benefit.

Time spent doing a Community Employment Scheme (CES) and/or a JoBridge Internship counts towards eligibility for the BTEA. An individual who is unemployed can participate on these courses and then qualify for the BTEA, and in effect can be receiving welfare payments for over a year longer than an individual who is unemployed for three months and is refused the BTEA. Is this the best use of scarce resources? Also is it not an anomaly that time spent in prison counts towards qualification for the BTEA and an individual unemployed for three months (78 days) does not qualify?

I would suggest that an individual with a third level degree is better equipped to return to the labour market and instead of claiming Welfare payments would be contributing by paying PRSI and Income Tax.

Thomas Kevin Walshe. 19-June-2013