



STATEMENT

to the

Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills

On

Brexit

March 21, 2017

Joint Committee on Education and Skills

Opening Statement by Prof. Brian MacCraith, President, Dublin City University

Introduction

I am grateful to the Committee for the opportunity to discuss the issue of Brexit and its potential implications for Dublin City University and, more generally, for the university sector in Ireland. Having consulted in advance with colleagues also presenting at this session, I have avoided repetition of general background issues and will instead move straight to those areas that present potential opportunities and challenges for us. The views presented here derive from research, multiple consultation sessions in recent months (e.g. DES, HEA, British-Irish Chamber of Commerce, and many others) and, in particular, from a Brexit Working Group that I established at DCU and that is chaired by DCU Deputy President, Prof. Daire Keogh.

The four main areas of relevance are:

- i. Student Flows
- ii. Staff Mobility
- iii. Research impact
- iv. North-South engagement
- v. Absorptive capacity and other constraining factors

i. Student Flows

There are significant numbers of Irish-domiciled students in the UK system – ca. 12,000 at present. Post Brexit, if these students are required to pay “international fees”, it is likely to result in increased application numbers to Irish universities. If there is no increase in capacity, this will further increase competition for places in Irish universities, with potential increases in

CAO points in specific programmes, and displacement of some student who may otherwise have obtained entry places.

The UK has a large international student cohort, especially in London. It is approximately 57% non-EU at present. Post Brexit, it is likely that these non-EU students will not be impacted financially (a drop in the value of Sterling would in fact make fees more competitive) but there may be other immigration and related factors that may make England, in particular, less attractive. On the other hand, it is likely that EU international student numbers in the UK will fall, due to the change from EU fee levels to international fee levels. Although other countries in the EU will compete for these students, especially those countries that are increasing provision of programmes delivered in the English language, it is still likely that demand for places in Irish universities will increase from this source.

It should also be noted that the upward trends in student flows into Ireland should not be seen in isolation from other geopolitical factors having a similar effect. For example, it is already being reported that the numbers of students from some Asian and Middle-Eastern countries choosing to study in the US are falling noticeably in 2017. Such trends provide additional opportunities for Ireland, as long as the quality of educational provision enjoys a suitably high reputation.

ii. Staff Mobility

In recent recruitment rounds at DCU, we are already seeing evidence of increasing numbers of EU academics in UK universities seeking to move away from the UK. In a recent UK survey of academics in the UK, nearly a third of respondents indicated that they were already aware of academics leaving the UK. In the same survey, more than three-quarters of EU nationals working in the UK stated that they were more likely to consider leaving UK higher education since the referendum. There is also evidence that non-EU nationals working in UK universities are concerned about their future status and the broader discourse on immigration issues. These factors are also likely to increase departures of staff from UK universities.

As is the case for students, the trends outlined here provide opportunities for Irish universities, especially in the context of attracting high-performing academic staff. This point is further reinforced in the next section dealing with research.

iii. Research impact

DCU has a strong track record in attracting both Irish and European Union research funding under Horizon 2020 (and all previous EU Framework Programmes), Marie Skłodowska Curie Actions and Erasmus. Post Brexit, we envisage significant opportunities to increase our involvement in EU funded programmes – H2020, Erasmus+, and their successors. In the context of H2020 projects, DCU-coordinated projects have almost always included UK partners. Similarly, DCU has been a popular partner in UK-led consortia with 5 of our largest, multi-million euro projects in recent years being of this type. Post Brexit, a more intensive effort will be required by the university in proactively engaging across Europe in developing relationships in research areas where UK universities may have been the natural partners in the past. As a research-intensive university, with a strong reputation for translational research, we expect to be an attractive partner in such consortia. It is likely that other Irish universities will be in a similar position to DCU in respect of the general issues outlined above.

It is also important to reference here that high-performing researchers (at all levels, from established professors to emerging stars) in UK universities will be seriously impacted by the possible/likely exclusion of the UK from Horizon 2020 (and successor) research funding. If this comes to pass, Irish universities with strong research reputations and well-maintained, high-class infrastructure will be attractive propositions for such researchers, as long as funding is available.

iv. North-South engagement

It is widely accepted that cross-border mobility and regular engagement of staff and students can contribute significantly to the long-term stabilisation of peace on this island. Having played

a key role in enhancing the flow of students from Northern Ireland to DCU (via the establishment of the McAleese Scholarships 4 years ago) and to other Irish HEIs, and having been to the fore in highlighting the barriers to NI students due to flaws in the CAO Points equivalence (now rectified), it is of great concern to DCU that these advances could be nullified in a post-Brexit situation. It is important that such issues are included in 'special case' considerations that may be invoked for the island of Ireland.

Moreover, from the research perspective, it is unsatisfactory to say the least that there is no bi-lateral funding mechanism in place to establish North-South research centres that would act in tandem and build on complementary expertise. DCU has been endeavouring for a number of years to establish such entities with NI partners. Initiatives such as these could play a key role in all-island economic development in a post-Brexit situation.

v. Absorptive capacity and other constraining factors

Most of the previous sections in this statement have highlighted significant growth and academic enhancement opportunities for Irish universities in a post-Brexit scenario. It is important to emphasise here that there are a number of major factors that, unaddressed, may constrain considerably the ability of the Irish HE System to avail of such opportunities:

- the unsustainable funding model (highlighted in the Cassells Report), which, if not addressed, will result ultimately in a significant drop in quality with consequent reputational damage
- insufficient capital funding to provide for the necessary expansion and upgrade of teaching, learning, and research infrastructure
- inadequate supply of suitable and affordable accommodation for students and staff; a major injection in such infrastructure will be required if we are to truly capitalise on the potential for attracting international students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Chair, it is very clear that, amidst all its challenges to other sectors of our economy and broader society, Brexit (in so far as we know how it will play out at this point) will offer a number of significant opportunities to the HE sector. There will also be some dangers, as highlighted above, but the overall perspective is positive in terms of potential. The key challenge to the HE sector is not Brexit itself, but rather our inability to exploit the opportunities presented in the absence of a targeted resource plan. Moreover, Ireland's inability to respond, if that is the outcome, will provide a significant advantage to other nations with whom we compete in the global HE environment.

I wish to applaud the committee in shining a light on these issues with a view to informing our nation's planning and negotiation priorities. Such strategic prioritisation will be crucial in ensuring that we collectively deliver well-educated citizens to underpin a well-functioning society and a prosperous economy.

Prof. Brian MacCraith

Uachtarán DCU

20 March 2017