

Statement

to the

Oireachtas Joint Committee
on Education and Skills

on

BREXIT

21st March 2017

Opening Statement by Mr Ned Costello, Chief Executive, Irish Universities Association

1. Introduction

On behalf of my colleague members of the IUA Council, I am grateful to the Committee for the opportunity to discuss the issue of Brexit and its potential implications for Irish Higher Education, in particular for the university sector. In doing so, we will focus on possible opportunities and threats in the three main areas of: students, staff, and research, as well as discussing the overall supportive framework required to capitalise on potential opportunities for Ireland, where these arise.

It is important to note however that post-Brexit impacts in these and other areas generally, will depend on the outcomes of the negotiations between the UK and the EU, and in particular the degree to which the UK disengages from the EU Single Market “four freedoms”; free movement of people, capital, goods and services. This is as yet unknown.

Our analysis is therefore based on recent relevant data which signals a number of potential scenarios, depending on the forthcoming negotiations.

2. Students

In respect of students, there are two main issues at stake:

Firstly, student flows between Ireland and the UK,

And secondly, student flows between Ireland, the EU (excluding the UK) and the rest of the world.

Ireland – UK Students

Traditionally, large numbers of Irish students have travelled to the UK for third level education, given the larger, more diverse system available there. While the number of Irish students in the UK has been decreasing steadily since 2010, there were still almost 11,000 such students studying full time in UK higher education in 2015. This represents over six percent of our own domestic student population.

Given the ongoing precarious financial situation faced by Irish universities, strong domestic demographic growth as well as increased demand from other EU and international students, a reversal of these flows would present a significant challenge for Irish HE.

In terms of UK-domiciled students studying in Ireland, the overall numbers are more modest, with 2,169 UK students in 2014-15. However this cohort represents the largest EU student group in Ireland by far, over 250 per cent higher than from Germany or France¹. Increasing the number of Northern Ireland students who come to study in this part of the Island is a particular priority for the universities.

At the more macro level, and in direct contrast to recent decreases in Irish numbers in the UK, the UK numbers in Ireland increased by 38 per cent between 2012/13 and 2014/15, with students possibly drawn by the significant difference in undergraduate fees, and the fact that UK student grants and loans are fully available to UK students studying at Irish HEIs.

That is the historical position. However, the most recent preliminary student application data for the academic year 2017-18, from the CAO and UCAS (a similar body to the CAO in the UK) shows that there has been a ten percent decrease in GB (England, Scotland, Wales) applications to Ireland this year, compared to 2016-17. Likewise, there has been a further 18 per cent reduction in the numbers of Irish students applying to the UK in 2017-18, compared to the previous year.

These figures point to increased reluctance by students and their families to cross the Irish Sea for higher education, no doubt prompted by uncertainties raised by Brexit. These uncertainties could relate to student fee status (although the Irish universities have guaranteed new 2017 entrants from the UK that their fees will remain the same as other EU students, even in the case of Brexit), future access to EU/UK labour markets, currency exchange rates, etc.

¹ See HEA data <http://www.heai.ie/node/1557>

Decreasing levels of student mobility across these islands also represent an unfortunate development in terms of medium to long term economic, social and cultural links between the various parts of the UK and Ireland.

Ireland – EU – rest of the world student flows

Given the prominence of its universities, its economic profile, recognised cultural heritage, and the prevalence of the English language, students from other EU countries and from all over the world have traditionally seen the UK as a destination of choice for higher education.

This traditional pull is being seriously weakened at the moment by the anti-immigration discourse associated with Brexit, but also by an increasingly restrictive UK immigration regulatory framework also applied to international students.

Preliminary UCAS data for the coming academic year 2017-18 show a seven percent decrease in EU applicants to UK higher education, with much larger decreases from certain EU countries. At the same time, here in Ireland we see a 17 percent increase in EU applications as of 1 February 2017, compared to 2016. It would appear that many European students are now considering Ireland as an alternative destination to the UK.

This is very positive from a cultural perspective, and in line with the International Education Strategy for Ireland 2016 – 2020². However, it has to be noted that a significant perturbation in EU Ireland student flows occasioned by Brexit does have financial and capacity implications, given our very limited elastic capacity and funding model.

In terms of non-EU students applying to study in Ireland, these students do not apply through the CAO and pay a fee which reflects the real cost of their programme. These students are also targeted under the International Education Strategy. We are currently seeing a very healthy 20 per cent increase, on average, in international applications to Irish universities for 2017 across a range of main non-EU markets. We do have significant concerns however about the supportive national framework needed to

² <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/International-Education-Strategy-For-Ireland-2016-2020.pdf>

ensure this success, in particular the need to ensure that *bona fide* students are awarded visas and residence permits in a timely manner.

There are increasing opportunities also to establish more ambitious bilateral arrangements with government scholarship programmes in non-EU countries. Where these already exist, our international partners are very pleased with the quality of the university education and research training which their students receive here. In the context of Brexit, there is considerable potential to expand such schemes, not only where they already exist but also with new partners.

3. Staff

The international mobility of academic staff and researchers is the lifeblood of well-connected, engaged and high performing universities across the globe. Irish universities have benefitted enormously from opening their recruitment processes to all applicants – wherever they may be based – over the last fifteen years. The academic sector is generally seen as one of the most internationalised labour markets across Europe.

The UK universities have high proportions of international staff, with 17 per cent from other EU countries and 12.5 per cent from non-EU countries. In 2014/15, there were 2,330 Irish staff in UK HEIs.³ This is the seventh largest nationality cohort overall, ahead of countries such as Australia, Canada and India. This obviously reflects our close geographic proximity, the common travel area, and the fact that many Irish academics have acquired their post-graduate qualification or post-qualification experience in the UK.

There are currently many reports of EU academics in UK universities seeking to move away from the UK, given the uncertainties and general political discourse arising from Brexit. Non-EU nationals working in UK universities are likewise reported to be facing uncertainty about their future status.

We do not have data on current numbers of UK staff (or other nationalities) in Irish HE, but it is reasonable to expect to see an increase in UK-based applicants for Irish university jobs. As university recruitment is aimed at

³ See HEFCE data <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/staff/intl/>.

securing the best possible candidates, this represents an opportunity. However, we need a supportive framework to make the most of this.

As with many things Brexit related, however, there is also a downside risk that barriers to mobility arising from Brexit could diminish the amount and quality of academic mobility between Ireland and the UK. This could, in particular, reduce opportunities for younger staff and researchers.

4. Research

Research collaboration between Ireland and the UK is both important and significant. The UK is a leader in scientific research and a key partner for Irish research groups. The UK is Ireland's second largest research partner in collaborations under the EU's flagship Horizon 2020 programme, with 892 collaborative links in successful projects so far, just behind Germany.

Under the EU's Research Framework Programme 7 (2007 – 2013), 72 per cent of the total Irish drawdown was for projects involving a UK partner; and almost 50 per cent of Irish-based recipients of the EU-funded Marie Skłodowska-Curie research awards choose the UK as their destination - around five times greater than the next most favoured countries. If as a result of Brexit, the UK no longer participates in these pan-European research programmes, then Irish researchers – particularly in the universities but also in the private sector, will need to diversify their research partnerships (replacing UK partners with partners from other countries) in order to retain their ability to win competitive funding. Specific supports from the main Irish funding agencies to explore such partnerships, with the explicit purpose of encouraging new EU funding proposals, would be a good investment in the short-term.

In the specific North-South context, a target of €175 million was set for cross-border projects under Horizon 2020. Up to September 2016 €55.7 million had been won for North-South projects. These are hugely significant in terms of cross-border cooperation in research, innovation, the modernisation of public services. Again this highlights the dangers of Brexit for cross border cooperation.

5. Overall supportive framework

The supportive framework needed to ensure that Irish universities can capitalise on the opportunities presented by Brexit and minimise the risks is broadly similar to those summarised in the International Education Strategy 2016-2020.

From the universities' perspective, the most of important of these are:

- Ensuring a sustainable funding model for Irish higher education, which allows for the necessary expansion of learning, teaching and research activities, as well as the capital funding requirements to allow this to happen to the highest level of quality.
- Ensuring a regulatory framework which allows Irish universities to be competitive in attracting high performing academics and researchers – at both well-established and early stages in their careers.
- Policy cohesion across the whole of Government, notably in Education and Skills: Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation; and Justice and Equality, particularly regarding the immigration of high quality non-EU students.
- Ensuring a sustainable supply of affordable accommodation for students and staff, particularly those coming from other countries.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion Chair, we reiterate our concerns regarding the potential impacts of Brexit on Irish higher education, and support the committee in its important work of debating these so that all parties can prepare sufficiently to inform the negotiation process effectively, and to ensure that Irish higher education is as well positioned as possible to benefit from possible opportunities and to minimise potential threats. Such preparation is crucial in ensuring that our higher education system remains inclusive, internationally-oriented, and well respected at home and abroad. This will help enable our shared ambitions for an educated, prosperous and progressive society.

IUA, 20 March 2017