

Implications of Brexit for the Irish Educational System

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Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills by UCD



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I thank the Chairman and the Committee for the invitation to speak to you this evening.

World class research and the creation of knowledge is a borderless and internationally collaborative activity.

University research, particularly in the STEM areas, is collaborative with the shared intellect and resources across many countries required to ultimately make discoveries that contribute to society and the economy. In UCD, we are deeply linked to many of the top UK universities in these knowledge networks and co-publish with UK more than with any other nation. They are great partners and we will strive to keep these strong and productive relationships.

These networks have been strengthened, and the speed of knowledge development advanced, by significant multi-country research awards from the European Union. The EU has committed €72 billion to research under the 7-year Horizon 2020 programme. Over the past nine years the UK has been the most successful country in terms of number of grantees to be awarded funding under Horizon 2020 and its predecessor, FP7. In 2014/15 alone, the UK won over €1 billion from this source, leading 48% of awards and creating over 9,000 FTE positions in UK universities. 45% of the projects won in UCD over the last 5 years have at least one UK partner.

At the conclusion of the Brexit negotiations the UK may no longer be eligible to access EU funded research networks. If this is the case, then I suggest that bilateral funding mechanisms are put in place between Ireland and the UK to maintain what are very valuable and well-developed knowledge networks that add to the competitiveness and social development of both nations.

Brexit presents Ireland with an opportunity to develop a leading position in European research

That said, the UK exit leaves Ireland as the only English speaking member state in the union. This makes it both an attractive destination for the very internationally mobile academic community and as a leader of EU funding programmes. However, it is far from inevitable that we will benefit from the UK exit. In order to capitalize on this opportunity, we will need to:

Increase our presence at the Commission's negotiating tables. Positioning is now underway for the development of Europe's next research framework programme and the UK are excluded from discussions. Ireland has an opportunity to move into the gap created, but only if we commit the resources to do so. The UK has always been successful in attracting large-scale funding initiatives and had, for example, been positioning itself at the centre of the EU's cloud and digital strategy.

Increase the capacity of our universities to respond to the opportunity presented. Our presidents have previously addressed you on the financial position of our sector and I will not revisit that discussion here, but it is true to say that the system simply cannot absorb the new opportunities presented to us by Brexit without commitment to additional recurrent and capital funding. We can attract leading academics from the UK, but in addition to the tax and housing constraints experienced by other sectors in attracting international staff, lack of flexibility in salary levels is an additional constraint to our competitiveness against other locations.

The priority given to the research and innovation in Theresa May's statement of 17th January, is proof positive of the UK's belief in the value of research and innovation to their continued competitiveness and recognition that Brexit could have potentially damaging repercussions for this sector. In Ireland, we need to be as steadfast in our belief of its value.

Industry may need to pivot to maintain exports in a changing market environment. Research and innovation can help.

The ability to move beyond commodity products is important to the sustainability of many businesses, such as those in the agrifood sector, whose market dynamics are already significantly impacted by a weakened sterling. The mushroom industry is one of those under significant pressure and they were widely reported as our first Brexit casualty late last year. One company, Monaghan Mushrooms is continuing to grow and survive in this challenging environment. In 2014, our researchers worked with Monaghan Mushrooms to assess the impact on the human diet of the Vitamin D enhanced mushrooms. They supplied these to M&S who reported that 50% of their product growth came from Monaghan's mushroom. They are now the sole supplier to M&S and are newly supplying other multiples.

EU and international students may look to Ireland as a destination for education

Although Ireland has developed a single international education brand, recognition of Ireland as a leading English-speaking destination for international students remains low. There is a lack of knowledge of our sector and the value it offers against competitors that is not helped by our position in international rankings tables – a position largely impacted by high student – staff ratios.

Brexit and the uncertainty surrounding the UK's future policies regarding the treatment of EU students as 'international students' presents an opportunity for UCD to position itself as a key competitor both for EU students wishing to study at an English-speaking university as well as for international students. At over 5,000, our international student cohort is the largest of any nationally and contributes over €100M to our economy nationally.

UK universities have recently been moved from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (now BEIS) to the Department of Education. There are concerns that this could reduce the weight of universities in Whitehall and therefore could reduce the pressure to try to get a better deal for international students regarding increased fees.

There is a significant likelihood that there will be increased demand from Irish and EU students who currently study in the UK. This may put pressure on funding for the Irish HE sector. Currently five times as many Irish students study in the UK compared to UK students staying in Ireland. The uncertainty of future fee rates in the UK is likely to drive this.

Brexit presents a clear opportunity for UCD to attract non-EU students/international students to study in Ireland over our UK competitors. International students add to the quality of life of our society and add to the available talent pipeline to support economic growth.

However, housing shortages and student concerns over the high cost of living will limit the universities ability to expand international student populations in key urban centres.

Brexit presents opportunities

In closing, as a leading research-intensive university and one with a well-developed infrastructure for international students, UCD is keen to capitalize on opportunities presented by Brexit and to minimize its potentially damaging impacts.