Opening Statement to

Joint Oireachtas Committee on European Union Affairs:

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26 June 2019

Thank you to the Chair and the Committee for inviting us to attend today’s proceedings to discuss alliance building to strengthen the European Union.

We are delighted to bring the Irish universities’ perspective to this discussion at this critical time, with the recent election of a new European Parliament, the impending appointment of a new European Commission, and the expected approval in the coming months for the period 2021-2027 of two of the EU’s most visible and important flagship programmes, Erasmus+ and the next Research and Innovation Framework Programme, Horizon Europe.

**Erasmus+**

**Erasmus+** is an EU programme supporting opportunities for education, training, young people and sport in Europe. Ireland was among the 11 countries that launched it as a student exchange programme in 1987 and currently, 400,000 higher education students, trainees and staff go abroad each year. Since 2014, Erasmus+ also offers opportunities for teachers, trainees and volunteers of all ages.

More than nine million people have taken part in the Erasmus+ programme over the last 30 years, including more than 90,000 students and staff from Ireland who have travelled to one of the other 32 eligible destinations (the other 27 EU Member States, Norway, Iceland, Turkey, Liechtenstein, Republic of North Macedonia).

During these 30 years, around 115,000 learners have likewise come to Ireland, cementing Ireland’s reputation as a high quality study destination, as well as laying key foundations in forging close working relationships with future leaders across Europe. In addition, these learners have generated an estimated 500,000 visitors to Ireland drawn from family and friends, strengthening our tourist industry and contributing to the economy.
The positive effects of this large-scale academic mobility go beyond simply helping young Europeans to get to know each other better and to improve their language skills. According to the European Commission, 40% of Erasmus+ trainees are offered a position by the company they trained in. In addition, the unemployment rate of young people who studied or trained abroad is 23% lower than that of their non-mobile peers five years after graduation.

During the 7 years of the current Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020), funding transfers of the order of €100 million will have been made by the European Commission to Ireland for learning mobility and other collaborative projects.

The outgoing European Parliament confirmed that funds for the next Erasmus+ programme should be tripled to allow more young people take part in the different learning mobility schemes, with a particular focus on removing all economic, social and cultural barriers to learner mobility. This would allow Ireland’s schools, further education colleges and higher education institutions to ensure the benefits of this mobility are available to all, not just those who can afford them.

This would help support the good work underway in Irish universities to widen participation in higher education from under-represented groups. As highlighted in the recent IUA Universities Impact Study, which Committee Members have received a Summary Report of in appendix, 25% of new students who entered an Irish university in 2017 did so through a dedicated access route for the target groups outlined in the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education.

The EMASI project – funded under the Erasmus+ programme and delivered by the IUA, working under the auspices of the Department of Education and Skills, with the support of the Higher Education Authority – looked at widening student participation in international mobility opportunities. Last year, Minister of State for Higher Education, Mary Mitchell O’Connor launched the report, “Enhancing Mobility for Access Students Ireland”, which calls for national targets to be introduced for the mobility of non-traditional students, such as mature students, student with disabilities or from lower socio-economic groups, together with reform in the areas of national data capture, funding, information, awareness and promotion. Such successful reform will lead to increased demand for international opportunities, and therefore national agencies and institutions must be adequately resourced to service such demand.

Given the well-known and well-evidenced benefits of learner mobility, we would welcome Members of the Committee encouraging and supporting students in their constituencies to consider international mobility and to avail of the opportunities. For the universities’ part, we have committed in the 2018 Charter for Irish Universities, which Committee Members have also received in appendix, to enabling 20% of students to undertake a study or placement abroad by 2025, and to increasing international student numbers to 15%.
EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation

The outgoing European Parliament has agreed to allocate €100 billion to the next EU Research and Innovation Framework Programme, Horizon Europe, which will run from 2021-2027.

In the words of the outgoing European Commissioner for Research, Science and Innovation, “Investing in research and innovation is investing in Europe’s future, in knowledge and new solutions. That is why we set a new level of ambition to deepen Europe’s innovation capability, provide lasting prosperity and preserve our global competitiveness. Horizon Europe is the most ambitious research and innovation programme ever.”

The current EU Framework Programme, Horizon 2020, focuses on excellent science, competitive industry and better society, and its €80 billion budget is open to anyone in Europe (higher education institutions, research organisations, public bodies, private companies including SMEs) with a competitive project in the above areas. While Ireland is a small EU country, over 2,000 applications are made every year for this funding. Given that this funding is highly competitive (with only an average 15% success rate for applications), Ireland does well to have slightly above average success rates (around 16%, at the same level as the UK, Denmark and Sweden), with an annual take by Irish participants in Horizon 2020 of around €150 million.

Under the EU’s Research FP7 2007-2013, the total Irish drawdown was €625 million. The target for FP8 is €1.2 billion, of which we have currently drawn down €709 million. Universities are the group to have drawn down the largest amount – at 55%, followed by industry.

European support for research and innovation has been particularly important in Ireland over the last ten years as a result of the significant under-investment by the Irish exchequer in these areas, particularly in fundamental research. Our capacity to draw down more EU funding can only be achieved if we provide more funding from domestic budgets. We are asking for an additional €50 million per year specifically for investigator-led research in order to ensure that our best scientists, many of whom are now getting no Irish government funding, are supported.

Hard-won successful Irish participation in such European programmes also brings a number of other important benefits. These include encouraging and enabling Irish researchers to compete with the best, to collaborate with world-class partners across Europe and beyond, and to bolster Ireland’s reputation as a centre of excellence for high value research, development and innovation.
Brexit

The ongoing issue of Brexit is also affecting how Ireland engages with the Erasmus+ and Horizon Europe programmes. Given our long-standing and positive relationships with the UK, particularly in the field of higher education and research, a disorderly Brexit will disrupt many of the constructive interactions in these areas we have enjoyed and which have been funded and facilitated through these EU programmes.

The UK attracts a large number of EU and international students. Likewise, the UK is one of the most popular destinations for Erasmus+ students from across Europe, including many Irish students who benefit from a mobility period there, in particular those going on a work placement as part of their studies. We need to develop relationships with alternative destinations for these students of ours. There is also the opportunity now on offer of many more European students seeking to spend part of their academic studies in Irish universities, particularly those looking to improve their English language skills. However, we need a planned and sustained programme of investment to refurbish existing infrastructure and build capacity in order to capitalise on this opportunity, particularly considering the surge in domestic student numbers that is now underway.

The UK is Ireland’s 2nd largest research partner in collaborations under Horizon 2020, with 1,554 collaborative links in successful projects. More generally, Irish researchers co-author more international research papers with UK partners than with any other country, including Germany and France combined. In order to maintain the benefits of strong European co-operation and significant funding for Irish universities, researchers and students, we need to strengthen existing relations with our other European partners, and develop new relationships with other partners beyond our existing networks. In saying that, there are capacity implications within the Irish HE system if we become very successful in developing alternative partnerships.

We are grateful for the ongoing excellent work of our state agencies such as Enterprise Ireland (which assumes overall coordination and leadership for Irish participation in EU Research Framework Programmes), the Higher Education Authority (which is our national agency for the higher education aspects of the Erasmus+ programme) and in particular the network of Irish Embassies across Europe and beyond. These bodies all have a track record of promoting our interests and supporting our involvement in these flagship programmes. We also work through other bodies such as the Chambers of Commerce, the overseas Embassies present here in Ireland, and many active European networks of universities, students and researchers.
**Alliance building**

Alliance building will be a major challenge for Ireland in the EU after Brexit, and will depend on being highly connected and engaged across each of the other remaining 26 Member States, as well as in Brussels. Traditionally, Ireland has rowed behind the UK on many issues. However, Ireland will not be alone in losing an important partner in the UK.

As the Committee will know, Ireland has already joined some policy-specific coalitions, such as the “new Hanseatic League” on the future of the Eurozone which includes the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The government position appears to be to deepen relationships with a range of fellow EU Member States on an issue-by-issue basis, whether as part of a group or individually.

Post-Brexit, the Franco-German alliance will play an even more significant role in the EU. However, it has been suggested, including by the European Council on Foreign Relations, that Ireland should invest much more in relationships with countries like Denmark and Portugal, with which we share our relatively small size and the wish to re-align ourselves post-Brexit.

In her contribution to the Committee on this topic, Catherine Day, formerly Secretary-General of the European Commission and current Chair of UCC, noted that Ireland has a defensive image among other EU members. As she explained, we are seen as being very quick to say no to co-operating on policy areas such as corporate tax while being much less willing to take an initiative on closer co-operation on other areas.

In this regard, higher education, research and innovation could be positive and fruitful areas where Ireland could take a lead on co-operating at a European level. Alliance building is not limited to government or parliamentary relationships, and the universities have a pivotal role to play here. As is evidenced in the latest Bologna Process Implementation Report, Ireland is already a leader when it comes to many aspects across the European Higher Education Area. There is an opportunity to build on the high-esteem in which we are held as such.

However, for universities to continue to effectively engage with European partners in order to realise national ambitions, the gap in State funding for Irish higher education must be closed. A more flexible, autonomous and nimble structure is also required to enable the universities to deliver on their full potential.

From our perspective, we would see many of Ireland’s existing and emerging European partners as likewise being natural and important partners in the increasingly globalised fields of higher education, research and innovation. In particular, we see benefit in strengthening alliances with the Netherlands, Denmark, Austria and Portugal, and with the Nordic/Baltic countries more generally. Of course we will also need to work more closely with the powerhouses in France and Germany, and the other big countries of Italy, Spain and Poland, as well as the EU Institutions.
themselves, in trying to influence their own strategic planning in ways which would be favourable to us also.

To that end, we offer to the Committee that should you be receiving parliamentary delegations from these EU Member States, we would be glad to meet with them to discuss how to strengthen and deepen our partnerships in higher education, research and innovation.

**Conclusion**

We know that the EU will be different post-Brexit. The question is how to prepare to get the best out of the next stage of our EU membership. Alliance building will be an important component of this.

There are Member States with which we have a lot in common and it will be easier to work with them on a regular basis than with those whose views are rather different from our own. However, Ireland is not geographically or politically naturally part of any existing grouping – and this can be an advantage. The universities are willing to step up their efforts in this perspective and are committed to working in partnership with government, the Oireachtas and other actors.

In order to best achieve this, we call on the Committee to encourage and support students to take up mobility opportunities available, while working to ensure that national agencies and institutions are adequately resourced to service increased demand for international opportunities and of incoming international students. We are asking for an additional €50 million per year for investigator-led research to support our scientists and in order to ensure that we have the capacity to continue and build on our success in drawing down EU funding.

Acknowledging Ireland’s leadership in the European Higher Education Area, we would welcome the Committee’s support in helping to enable Irish universities to deliver on our full potential, including when it comes to effectively engaging with European partners through existing active networks or parliamentary delegations. The gap in State funding for Irish higher education must be closed, and more flexible, autonomous and nimble structures must be developed.

We look forward to working closely with the Committee as part of its own work in this area. Thank you again for the opportunity to engage on this important topic, and we wish the Committee well with your deliberations.