

SSUNI Briefing Document

This briefing document has been prepared collaboratively by the Executive of the Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland and has been written up by Communications Officer Luc Berthelot to reflect current research on the issue of North-South mobility in addition to our personal views and the views of the young people we represent.

1. There are a number of barriers to North-South education mobility, which will be outlined in this section of the briefing document, that can be broadly summarised as relating to the CAO system, communication, specific requirements and the costs associated with attending university.
 - 1.1. The primary barrier to North-South education mobility is the CAO system for university applications.
 - 1.1.1. Currently, it is only possible to achieve maximum points under this system if you complete 4 A-Levels, something only 4% of Northern Irish students do and is not generally encouraged in Northern Irish students. Additionally, there are additional costs to schools of having pupils sitting exams for a 4th A-Level, further reducing the likelihood that a Northern Irish student will sit enough A-Levels to feasibly go to university in the Republic of Ireland.
 - 1.1.2. The new reforms proposed by the Universities Ireland Working Group are a step in the right direction but still require a 4th A-Level/AS Level or Extended Project to achieve the maximum 600 points. The option to achieve full points with 2 A-Levels and 2 AS Levels is also unrealistic, as nearly all Northern Irish students study a minimum of 3 A-Levels.
 - 1.1.3. There is also concern about the new reforms as not all students in Northern Ireland sit A-Level exams with exam boards that offer AS Levels. If an exam board does not offer AS Levels, a Northern Irish student would ultimately be forced to still take 4 A-Levels.
 - 1.1.4. Additionally, there is no system for supporting those from disadvantaged backgrounds in Northern Ireland. The UK has contextual offers, and the Republic has the Higher Education Access Route, but no such system exists for Northern Irish students to access relating to CAO point requirements.
 - 1.1.5. We are also saddened to see that the Trinity Feasibility scheme will cease for applications seeking admission in September 2026. This scheme is an excellent way to incentivise North-South mobility and its stopping is a further deterrent.
 - 1.1.6. The existence of 25 bonus points for maths A-Level / higher level maths Leaving Certificate is also a barrier, as maths is much less commonly taken at A-Level than it is at Leaving Certificate. This is particularly challenging as students in Northern Ireland

take a maximum of 4 A-Levels generally and students in the Republic of Ireland take 6 at a minimum. This means that a Northern Irish student taking maths A-Level is a much more limiting choice (particularly if they are also applying through UCAS) than a student in the Republic choosing to take higher level maths.

1.2. The Modern Language GCSE requirement is also a deterrent, as shown by a recent Economic and Social Research Institute (ERSI) report. Taking a language at GCSE is not a requirement in most schools in Northern Ireland and therefore pupils are unknowingly closing off the opportunity to study at many institutions in the Republic of Ireland when they do not study a language at GCSE.

1.3. Another barrier is limited information. This manifests in several ways.

1.3.1. Students are rarely taught about the CAO system and requirements such as the modern languages requirement in careers classes like they are taught about the UCAS system. In our membership's experience, this leaves many students attempting to navigate the process on their own and many give up without the same support they receive when applying through UCAS.

1.3.2. Students are rarely aware of the number of universities available in the Republic of Ireland, with many focusing solely on prominent universities (such as those in Dublin). This reflects poor careers education, but also the limited North-South mobility there is currently. There is no 'word of mouth' effect for universities in the Republic of Ireland from current Northern Irish students in the same way there is for universities in England, Scotland, and Wales. The effect of this can be seen through the fact that more than half of Northern Irish students attend just one university in the Republic of Ireland, Trinity.

1.3.3. Many students, even if they apply, are deterred from accepting offers due to a lack of understanding of the practical steps required to attend university, such as student finance, and how they differ in the Republic of Ireland compared to the UK.

1.3.4. The timing of offers is also a barrier to education mobility. Northern Irish students are less likely to take places offered to them for university in the Republic of Ireland. We feel this is primarily due to the later announcement of offers, in addition to the barriers mentioned in section 1.4. UCAS offers more time to plan accommodation and student finance through its system of conditional offers, particularly when A-level results are released before Leaving Certificate results. This leaves students scrambling to cover practicalities such as accommodation, particularly if they have accepted an offer through UCAS already.

- 1.4. Relating to the point raised in paragraph 1.3.3, the next most obvious barrier to North-South mobility is the costs associated.
 - 1.4.1. There is a perception among Northern Irish students that living in the Republic of Ireland is more expensive than living in England, Scotland and Wales, which discourages them from applying through both UCAS and CAO.
 - 1.4.2. An additional concern is that many Northern Irish students view remaining in Northern Ireland for universities as the only financially sound decision they can make relating to university, as moving away is too expensive. This is a factor limiting mobility between Northern Ireland and Great Britain but is more pronounced in limiting North-South mobility due to housing costs in the Republic of Ireland being higher.
 - 1.4.3. The ongoing cost of living crisis in Northern Ireland has exasperated these issues and increased the saliency of costs as a barrier to North-South education mobility.
- 1.5. Our final concern relates to future-proofing the CAO system of applications. Education in Northern Ireland will evolve and there will be reforms, this may lead to further reform of the CAO system being necessary. Students in Northern Ireland need to be reassured that the CAO system will be updated to reflect the reality of education in Northern Ireland to feel confident in North-South education mobility.
2. The Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland have several recommendations to address these issues.
 - 2.1. Northern Irish students should be able to achieve the maximum number of CAO points with 3 A-Levels.
 - 2.2. The creation of a system to support those from disadvantaged backgrounds with some form of contextual offer/points requirement.
 - 2.3. An evaluation of the 25-point bonus for maths A-Level to see if it could be expanded/made more accessible.
 - 2.4. Universities in Ireland should make greater efforts to reach out to Northern Irish students and inform them about their options. This could take the form of attending University fairs or visiting schools in NI.
 - 2.5. Now that the Executive is restored, North-South ministerial cooperation is vital. There are several areas where this can occur. Northern Irish ministers should be supported in doing the following.
 - 2.5.1. Careers classes should be updated to give greater emphasis to the CAO system so Northern Irish students feel more comfortable and supported applying through it.

- 2.5.2. Information about CAO and its requirements (such as the modern languages requirement) should be more easily accessible and emphasised to Northern Irish students when picking GCSEs.
- 2.5.3. Information about the practicalities of student finance, accommodation etc should be more easily accessible in careers classes and on websites such as NI Direct.
- 2.5.4. Work to promote modern languages in schools and to students, so uptake is greater, and this barrier is limited in its effect.
- 2.6. The date when CAO offers are released should be moved closer to the date of A-Level results to reduce time pressures on students.
- 2.7. There should be greater financial support available for students to deal with the costs associated with moving from home for university, particularly amidst the cost-of-living crisis.
- 2.8. There must be a set system of evaluation for the CAO system that regularly assesses its success at North-South mobility and ensures that it is kept in line with the reality of education in Northern Ireland.
- 2.9. Continued engagement with Northern Ireland students is vital to ensuring North-South mobility. Our views must consistently be taken on board to ensure that systems are up-to-date and effective.

Sources:

ESRI Report Comparing North-South Education Systems:

https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS138_1.pdf

ESRI Report on Limited Cross-Border Student Mobility:

<https://www.esri.ie/news/institutional-barriers-limit-cross-border-student-mobility>

Trinity Feasibility Scheme:

<https://www.tcd.ie/study/country/n-ireland/>

Oireachtas Report on North-South Enrolment in Tertiary Education:

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_education_further_and_higher_education_research_innovation_and_science/reports/2022/2022-07-13_report-on-north-south-student-enrolment-in-tertiary-education_en.pdf

Times Article on Proposed CAO Reforms:

<https://www.irishtimes.com/student-hub/2023/12/07/universities-plan-easier-access-for-ni-students-to-colleges-in-south/#:~:text=Under%20the%20changes%2C%20A%2Dlevel,levels%20and%20two%20AS%2Dlevels.>