



## **JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE**

### **North South Education Mobility**

I would like to thank the Committee for the invitation to return today to discuss North South Education Mobility on behalf of THEA. There are a number of threads of discussion from previous meetings to which I would like to add my support and hopefully I can shed further light on other relevant matters.

The last time I was in front of this committee to discuss this topic was 21 February 2023. At that time there was a focus on this committee's report on North South Student Enrolment in Tertiary Education of 13 July 2022 and its various recommendations. Revisiting these recommendations in preparation for this meeting we can see that some progress has been made in the following areas:

- HEA and Solas are now more engaged in cross-border activity with a particular focus on all-island apprenticeship programmes, funding of nursing and medical education places in NI for RoI students and investment in cross-border research activity.
- Universities Ireland has addressed the issue of A-Level result conversion to CAO points. With ready support from THEA, a recommendation was made in November 2023, and this is currently being addressed by the Academic Councils in each of the relevant RoI colleges.
- The Government's commitments under the New Decade New Approach agreement have been somewhat addressed by a Shared Island Unit Investment of €45m in the new teaching block on Ulster University's Derry campus. Additional commitments to the broader North West within that agreement still remain to be addressed.
- DFHERIS has made progress on a sustainable funding model for Higher Education.
- A new student accommodation strategy was recently published by DFHERIS to directly fund student accommodation on university campuses and also a welcome focus to examine student accommodation plans emerging in the new Technological Universities.
- The recently published Global Citizens 2030, under Pillar 5 has an emphasis on encouraging tertiary education collaboration on a North South basis. This is a timely inclusion which will allow greater focus at an institutional level on this activity.

Taking these developments into consideration it is also important to consider additional pieces of work that have been completed on this topic within the past 12 months. These include a report published by the British Council, *Policy Insight Higher Education Mobility UK Ireland*, and another by the ESRI *Student Mobility in Ireland and Northern Ireland*. Both reports add a great deal to our understanding of the current pattern of student mobility on this island and also in terms of UK Ireland mobility. They also draw similar conclusions to this committee's work with a particular concentration on environmental factors outside the control of the HE institutions but more closely linked to societal factors. Specifically referenced is the need for clearer career guidance on both sides of the border, and also a recognition of the problems encountered in securing suitable student accommodation particularly for first year students.

It is from the vantage point of a border college that I wish to add to the understanding of North South student mobility. It is evident from the North West that South to North mobility is very different in character to North to South mobility. The 'Feeder School' data published on 12 December 2023 shows the significant contribution that border counties play in providing new entrants to Ulster University and Queens University Belfast (QUB). 72.7% of students that commenced studies in September 2023 at the two NI universities from RoI came from the six counties of Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan, and Sligo. In particular, Donegal stands out among these counties as the source of almost 43% of all students entering the two NI universities in 2023 from RoI. In addition, ATU was the destination for 57% of Donegal students, Ulster University was the second most popular destination at 15%, with University of Galway (6.5%) and QUB (6.4%) filling the next two places.

Data in the ESRI report shows that the small number of students that travel North to South for their studies are distributed across border colleges and leading high-point programmes in the traditional universities. Data from the CAO shows just 176 Level 8 net acceptances in 2023 for applicants from NI (compared to 186 in 2022) and only 24 Level 7/6 net acceptances for applicants from NI in 2023 (compared to 32 in 2022). At ATU Donegal an examination of new entrant statistics shows that a small majority of courses attract applicants from NI and typically enrolments are in low single figures. Given the many cross-border links that exist in the North West and compared to South to North flows this represents a very low penetration of the CAO system in NI. In contrast, the collaborative programmes developed with NWRC and Ulster University are clearly distinguishable in ATU data as successful initiatives that attract NI students. In the North West it is clear that this asymmetric cross-border student flow is even more acute, with flows from South to North massively dwarfing flows from North to South. ATU has recently recruited a Schools Engagement Officer specifically to interact with schools in NI to address this imbalance. More school leavers from Donegal go to study at universities in NI than the total number of students from NI that travel to study at colleges in the CAO system.

In identifying possible impediments for NI students travelling to RoI, outside of economic factors, the CAO system is likely to be a key element. The UCAS system reduces uncertainty for applicants in providing them with a conditional offer of a place linked to the achievement of identified grades. Through the CAO system the student has the added uncertainty at application stage of not knowing what the points will be for their chosen preferences when the results come out. Professor Gerry McKenna, Senior Vice President of the Royal Irish Academy, outlined to the committee in February 2023 that applicants can in some ways become attached to their UCAS offer, meaning that a subsequent offer from CAO may not seem as attractive. It is also important that CAO and UCAS final offers come out at the same time to ensure that students can equally consider the available options, delays in the processing of Leaving Certificate results need to be resolved for 2024 school leavers. In the border counties of RoI the career guidance staff and teachers are to be acknowledged for the support they give school students with UCAS applications including advice on course requirements, writing references, providing predicted grades, and support in preparing personal statements.

A point raised last year by Dr Anthony Soares, Director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies, has added relevance now with the recent restoration of the Stormont Assembly. He argued for the inclusion of Tertiary Education within the remit of the North South Ministerial Council to ensure relevant policies and legislation in both jurisdictions are supportive of North-South student mobility. The North West Tertiary Education Cluster (NWTEC) - where ATU is a partner with Ulster University, North West Regional College and Donegal ETB - sees great merit in its link to the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) through the North West Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP). NWSGP was established via the NSMC as the key strategic body to co-ordinate and influence all aspects of future growth for the North West City Region.

The revisions to the CAO points for A-Level students brought about by Universities Ireland is a very welcome development and provides for a more equitable mechanism for comparing examination results achieved via the Leaving Certificate and A-Levels. However, the proposed change does not address other qualifications used for entry into university in the NI and UK system, such as, UK Level 3 awards taught in some secondary schools in NI and application involving a mix of A-Levels and UK Level 3 awards. A further review of appropriate equivalences for entry into RoI Level 6 and Level 7 programmes may also be overdue. ATU has recently joined Universities Ireland where ATU will reflect the perspectives of the West and North West region and an awarding body for Level 6 to Level 10 programmes.

Professor Gerry Mc Kenna also highlighted a concern in his address to the committee last year that could impede collaboration between ATU and its partners in NWTEC on healthcare courses. CORU the Regulator for Health and Social Care Professionals has introduced policies in relation to the recognition of qualifications achieved outside of the state which may impact on the mobility of qualified staff from NI for employment roles in RoI. In addition, this has the potential to discourage learners from transferring from RoI to NI to complete a whole range of allied health training programmes, if they perceive challenges in registering for roles in RoI when qualified. A similar change introduced through the recently established Qualifications Advisory Board (QAB), which was jointly instituted by the Minister for Education and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, has consequences for our BSc (Hons) in Early Childhood Care, Health and Education. This programme is delivered by ATU staff at NWRC in Derry. These changes place the additional requirement on the programme delivery team and students to facilitate the completion of some placement elements at an approved Tusla facility in RoI. For ATU this collaboration framework has been the basis for a successful arrangement with NWRC allowing students from a variety of programmes to complete ATU degree programmes.

While the Irish Government is investing significantly in the provision of medical education and nursing places in NI for RoI applicants other Government education initiatives do not have the flexibility to cross the border. Specifically, the Springboard programme, Human Capital Initiative programmes, and Skillnets initiatives do not extend to applicants with an NI address even where the individual may be in employment in RoI. Given the near full employment in RoI, and the necessity to attract skilled labour into the country, this is an area that needs more attention. It is also an obvious area where change could be introduced that would address the asymmetry in student flows and bolster numbers resident in NI studying in RoI.

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