



**OPENING STATEMENT
OF
UNIVERSITIES IRELAND
TO
THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH,
INNOVATION AND SCIENCE

NORTH-SOUTH STUDENT ENROLMENT IN TERTIARY EDUCATION

FEBRUARY 2024**

I am President of Ollscoil na Gaillimhe/University of Galway and of the Universities Ireland Council.

Thanks fur tha invite. Go raibh maith agaibh as an gcuireadh.

I am pleased to represent Universities Ireland here today as we have a particular role in encouraging cross-border co-operation in higher education, including student mobility.

UNIVERSITIES IRELAND was founded in 2003 by the nine university presidents on the island of Ireland to promote and develop co-operation between their institutions (the Open University in Ireland became its 10th member in 2011, with TU Dublin joining in 2020 and ATU in 2024). Since its founding, Universities Ireland has engaged in a wide range of activities of mutual interest and benefit including work on the promotion of Irish universities abroad; awarding of joint degrees and transfer arrangements between universities; developing and pursuing joint research opportunities; and higher education policy.

Universities Ireland brings together at the highest level the academic and administrative leaders of all the universities on the island. We have ourselves identified the need for an all-island structure through which we can co-operate on issues of higher education policy and also to act together to influence change such as supporting peace and reconciliation through, for example, the Universities Ireland Historians Group, or by collectively supporting placements in Ireland for international scholars at risk. The Universities Ireland scholarships and bursaries programmes support postgraduate mobility and shared academic exchange on an all-island basis.

Through Universities Ireland, our institutions co-operate on a wide range of issues related to higher education policy as well as to act jointly, for instance to support the Scholars at Risk programme, and to encourage cross-border mobility for postgraduate level study. In addition, the activities of the Universities Ireland Historians Group have made a significant impact in recent years through the all-island conferences on the theme of "Reflecting on a Decade of War and Revolution in Ireland 1912-1923"; the PhD bursary programme; and support for the digitalisation and 'repatriation' of military records to PRONI and the National Archives.

The Centre for Cross Border Studies provides the Secretariat for Universities Ireland.

We welcome this discussion with regard to North-South student mobility. More generally and further, we support an enhanced interest and support for North-South co-operation in higher education and research. With that in mind, we wrote last year to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Innovation, Research & Science in Ireland, and to the Permanent Secretary for the

Department of the Economy in Northern Ireland to support the inclusion of Higher and Further Education in the scope of work and the areas of co-operation of the North-South Ministerial Council. Higher and Further Education are not currently within the scope of work of the North-South Ministerial Council and we believe that many of the issues raised here could usefully be discussed and facilitated there. Having had subsequent discussions in this regard with the Secretariat to the North-South Ministerial Council, a consideration of the scope of the work of the Council could not be progressed while the Stormont Assembly was not in place. On the re-establishment of the Assembly, we will now engage with the responsible Ministers in the two jurisdictions to prompt that discussion.

With regard to North-South student mobility, the ESRI published a very useful report entitled *Institutional barriers limit cross-border student mobility* which was launched by the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in September 2023. The report came to the following conclusions:

‘Stakeholders highlight the value of mobility for students themselves, for higher education institutions and for enhancing cross-border cooperation. The findings indicate:

- *School-based guidance could provide greater awareness of options in other jurisdictions, a process which could be usefully supported by outreach work by higher education institutions.*
- *There is a case to reexamine CAO point equivalences for A-levels, given the very small group of Northern Ireland candidates who take four A-levels, and to look at modern foreign language requirements, given much lower take-up of modern foreign languages in Northern Ireland.*
- *Decisions about where to study take place, for students, against a broader backdrop of rising costs and access to differential levels of financial supports. Current accommodation costs and lack of housing availability are undoubtedly barriers to students moving from Northern Ireland (and the rest of the UK). While financial supports are in place for students in both jurisdictions (though the level and nature vary), there is a broader issue of the extent to which such supports cover the costs of participation.’*

What follows will take each of these in turn:

School-based guidance:

Universities Ireland strongly supports the recommendation that a campaign of engagement with School-based guidance counsellors is a critical element of raising awareness of the potential for North-South student mobility, particularly in highlighting the choices available to students. While this can be supported to a certain extent by ‘outreach work by higher education institutions’, it could be usefully, more efficiently and less competitively framed as a sectoral engagement campaign. Further, such engagement is not without cost and additional relatively modest financial support, for example from the Shared Island Initiative, for such engagement would make it more impactful. Such resourcing need not be recurring as an investment in a short, focussed campaign could raise awareness over a short period of time.

Universities Ireland, with additional funds above those already provided by Government, would be willing to co-ordinate such a campaign. We will include that in 2025 in the work programme we submit for funding.

Re-examining CAO point equivalences for A-levels

When I appeared before this Committee last year, I undertook to add this to the agenda of our next Universities Ireland Council meeting with a view to establishing a timely review and the progressing of any necessary adjustment, as proposed. On foot of this, a Working Group of Universities Ireland

was established, chaired by Professor Pól Ó Dochartaigh, the Deputy President and Registrar of University of Galway. The membership of the Working Group and its full report are provided in the Appendix to this statement.

The Working Group reported in November 2023.

With regard to CAO points equivalences for A-Levels

‘the Working Group proposes that, analogous to the use of the best six Leaving Certificate results (out of 7 or more) whereby a student can make up points from a mixture of “higher” and “ordinary” level subjects’, A Level candidates be allowed to use the best 3 A Levels, in combination with a 4th A-level or an Extended Project or an AS subject. This will mean that applicants can attain a score of 600 points with 3 A levels and 1 AS.

It also proposes that candidates can be considered on 2 A-levels and one or two AS levels.’

Understanding, as was noted last year, that entry requirements are a matter for each university, I understand that all members of Universities Ireland have agreed to implement these recommendations by 2025 at the latest. University of Galway will implement the changes in the current year.

As part of the annual refresh of the Queen’s University Belfast’s (QUB) student recruitment strategy, its Vice President of Student and Corporate Services, Ms Caroline Young, has tasked the Head of Global Student Recruitment with exploring the development of a tailored student recruitment plan focussed on the Republic of Ireland.

With regard to the review of the modern foreign language requirements for entry under the CAO, given much lower take-up of modern foreign languages in Northern Ireland, as indicated in the ESRI Report, the Universities Ireland Working Group *‘the point was made in consultation with Northern Irish partners that as a European-facing state and EU member, the Republic would not wish to move away from the current approach to languages and, as such, there is an issue for NI to address. This was accepted by them.’* There is therefore work to be done in Northern Ireland to increase the proportion of students who take modern languages.

The Working Group concluded that

‘the delayed release of results, at a time when the UK A Levels Boards and other countries systems have gone back to normal, is a negative factor in respect of mobility from North to South, because students in the North are often sitting for weeks with an offer already in the hand and thus will feel compelled to accept that, including putting a deposit on accommodation etc. The delay impacts negatively on the ability to secure accommodation in a difficult market in the Republic. We urge strongly that the Department of Education ensure a return to the normal Leaving Certificate results release date, both in the interest of Cross-Border mobility and also in the interests of the Leaving Certificate students.’

This remains the case. Our universities have responded in a timely manner positively and with considerable flexibility to the call for a review of CAO points equivalences for A Levels, recognising that this is only one cog in the wheel that needs to be oiled and we will monitor its impact. In doing so, we hereby also request the Department of Education to respond in kind by ensuring a return to the normal Leaving Certificate results release date. This is important, in different ways, for mobility in both directions in Ireland, an important part of the mandate of co-operation envisioned by the work of Universities Ireland.

A broader backdrop of rising costs and access to differential levels of financial supports

We welcome the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science's financial support for student mobilities across Europe. However, as we noted in last year's submission 'the availability of student accommodation is a complex issue and Europe-wide, not confined to RoI. We also note that relative wage rates and, consequently, differing purchasing power North and South render RoI less affordable for students from NI. In that context, we acknowledge the work to date in this regard and support the further development of a new student accommodation strategy to deliver affordable accommodation, North and South, particularly for students in need'.

In addition to the recommendations of the ESRI Report, there are a number of other issues with regard to North-South co-operation in our sector that should also be noted, drawing from last year's report of this Committee:

Increase North-South research funding. We strongly support increased investment in North-South research funding given the importance of research at scale in addressing societal issues. We encourage a competitive, multi-institutional and multi-disciplinary approach to such investments. We particularly support the potential for increased levels of funding 'specifically for analysis of all aspects of North-South relations, co-operation and integration' as suggested on page 29 of the report. This does not only have a direct and positive impact on North-South relations and on our communities North and South. It also has the potential to be internationally impactful and distinctive given our shared experience on the island of Ireland.

We would also encourage the Committee to consider support for East-West research partnerships (between RoI, NI and GB) as a means of fostering a parity of co-operation across jurisdictions and between our different communities.

The timely implementation of a sustainable funding model for higher education. We strongly agree that many of the proposals outlined in this report will be contingent on putting a sustainable funding model in place for third level education and that the implementation of funding commitments as outlined in the 'Funding the Future' document must be the first step towards ensuring the HE sector is adequately funded.

Staff-student ratios (SSRs) in GB universities are as low as 12:1. They are significantly higher in RoI and will remain higher even with the investment envisaged in 'Funding the Future'. The student experience is defined by many things, none more so than SSRs. Increased investment in higher education is, therefore, a prerequisite for a student experience that properly and decently serves and invests in student mobility and our students.

We acknowledge that some progress has been made in this regard and look forward to further investment to fulfil the promise of 'Funding the Future'.

Increase cross-border public transport links. We join the Committee in welcoming the current strategic rail review which is being conducted on an all-island basis. We also agree that more progress is needed with regard to public transport links, particularly outside the Eastern rail corridor between Belfast and Dublin. We also support such initiatives in the light of the urgent need for climate action.

In conclusion, again, we welcome the Committee's continued interest in this area. I am sure the Committee will agree that we are playing our part in facilitating cross-border co-operation in a number of areas, including research, teaching and student mobility.

We look forward to working with the Committee and with policy makers more generally in advancing our common interests in and for our students, North and South.

Thank ye agane. Go raibh maith agaibh arís.

APPENDIX



Leaving Certificate – A Level Equivalencies Working Group Report

Recommendations as adopted by UI Council

Cognisant of the issues around student mobility between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, highlighted in a 2022 Oireachtas Report, among other places, Universities Ireland in Spring 2023 established a Working Group tasked with making recommendations on the points equivalencies used for A Levels and the Leaving Certificate. The desire is to enhance mobility in both directions, with current numbers seen as far below what one might expect, given the proximity of the two jurisdictions to each other. The group met on five occasions in summer and autumn 2023.

Recommendations

Having considered a range of factors around North-South mobility in Ireland in the last twenty years, the Working Group recognises that such mobility is not at the level that one would wish or indeed was expressed as desirable by the Oireachtas Committee for Education in its July 2022 report, *North South Student Enrolment in Tertiary Education*.¹ According to HEA Statistics, the number of students enrolled in all HEIs in the Republic with a domicile in NI (population 1.9 million) is barely higher than the number who are domiciled in Co. Leitrim (population 35,000), the county with the lowest number of HE enrolments in the Republic. According to the Higher Education Authority, in the years 2019-22 the average enrolment from NI was 1,562 vs 1,480 from Leitrim.² This at a time when some 14,000 students from NI are studying at Third-Level institutions in Great Britain.

Among the main inhibitors of movement from North to South are the Leaving Certificate – A Level equivalencies. Other factors also play a role, and in particular the availability and dissemination of information about tertiary education in each jurisdiction about the other. Additional factors that go

¹ *North South Student Enrolment in Tertiary Education*, at: 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.

² <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/access-our-data/access-our-data-students/>.

beyond the scope of this report include accommodation and the overall cost of living differentials between the two jurisdictions.

1. *Leaving Certificates and A Levels*

Almost all students who take the Leaving Certificate in the Republic take seven subjects, and occasionally more. Almost all students who take A Levels in the North (and in England and Wales) take a maximum of three (in 2019-22 an average of just 3% in NI took four A Levels),³ though other qualifications are now also being introduced in parallel. The modular structure for A Levels, by which candidates can take a fourth subject for the first year of the A Level Cycle and obtain an AS qualification additional to three A Levels, has been retained by the CCEA (the NI A Level Award Body) and the Welsh Board, but is no longer available from the English Boards.⁴ This AS gives extra CAO points, though it does not currently enable a candidate to achieve the maximum.

An additional constraint on A Level candidates achieving the maximum Common Points Scale points relates to the 25 bonus points for Higher Maths in the Leaving Certificate.

Another factor impacting on equivalencies is the relative participation rates in A Levels vs Leaving Certificate. Approximately 90% of students take the Leaving Certificate, whereas the equivalent figure for A Levels in NI is in the region of 50-60%.⁵ Thus, for example, 5% of the LC cohort is ca. 4.5% of the age cohort in the Republic, whereas 5% of the A Level cohort is only 2.5-3% of the age cohort in NI.

The current equivalencies used for A Levels for entry to universities in the Republic mean that it is only possible to achieve the maximum 625 points by taking 4 A Levels, one of which must be Maths (see Table 1 below). This is widely considered to unfairly disadvantage A Level candidates, and according to a recent ESRI report is a major contributing factor to the low student mobility from North to South.⁶

³ Emer Smyth and Merike Darmody, *Student Mobility in Ireland and Northern Ireland*, ESRI Research Series 166 (September 2023), p. 13, at: <https://www.esri.ie/publications/student-mobility-in-ireland-and-northern-ireland>.

⁴ There are five A Level award bodies across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, as follows:

AQA (Assessment and Qualifications Alliance)

CCEA (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment)

OCR (Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations)

Pearson, under its Edexcel brand

WJEC (Welsh Joint Education Committee), under its WJEC and Eduqas brands

⁵ The average number of A Level candidates in NI in the years 2019-22 was around 11,000, compared to ca. 60,000 Leaving Cert candidates. This is a ratio of less than 1:5, whereas the overall population ratio is approx. 2:5. See Smyth and Darmody, *Student Mobility in Ireland and Northern Ireland*, p. 13.

In England over the academic years 2018-21 on average 49% of student at the end of 16-18 study did A-levels (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-attainment-at-19-years>) but a further 11% did other level 3 qualifications. We cannot obtain similar statistics for NI or Wales

⁶ Smyth and Darmody, *Student Mobility in Ireland and Northern Ireland*, pp. 12-15.

The Working Group proposes that, analogous to the use of the best six Leaving Certificate results (out of 7 or more) whereby a student can make up points from a mixture of “higher” and “ordinary” level subjects”, A Level candidates be allowed to use the best 3 A Levels, in combination with a 4th A-level or an Extended Project⁷ or an AS subject. This will mean that applicants can attain a score of 600 points with 3 A levels and 1 AS. It also proposes that candidates can be considered on 2 A-levels and one or two AS levels.

The equivalencies thus arrived at are outlined in Table 2 below, and they are proposed for adoption. They will also be forwarded to THEA for consideration by them.

Table 1 (current equivalencies)

Leaving Certificate		A Levels		4 th A	EP/ AS Level	
H1	100	A*	185	45	A* ⁸	31
H2	88	A	156	38	A	26
H3	77	B	131	32	B	22
H4	66	C	106	26	C	18
H5	56	D	84	20	D	14
H6	46	E	63	15	E	11
H7	37					

Table 2 (proposed equivalencies)

Leaving Certificate		A Levels		4 th A/ EP /AS
H1	100	A*	192	24
H2	88	A	173	24 ⁹
H3	77	B	154	20
H4	66	C	137	18
H5	56	D	126	16
H6	46	E	116	14
H7	37			

The proposal would mean that the following maximum points are available:

Table 3

	Points	With Bonus
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⁷ The Extended Project is a school-leaving qualification taken by many students that is broadly equivalent to an AS Level.

⁸ This grade is only available for the Extended Project and A Level, but not AS.

⁹ In the Extended Project the top grade available is A*, whereas at AS Level the top grade is an A. In order not to penalise AS Level students for not achieving a grade that was not available, but in order also not to make an A at AS Level worth more than an A at A Level, it is proposed that 24 points be offered for both A and A*. This will enable top points for candidates who have 3 A Levels + 1 AS Level.

3 A Levels	576	601
3 A Levels + AS or EP or 4 th A Level	600	625

Other Considerations

2. Information Flow

Whether because of time constraints, a lack of engagement or a lack of information flow in schools, most students both North and South are left effectively to their own devices when it comes to finding out about study in the other jurisdiction. The Minister for DFHERIS, Simon Harris, indicated a clear willingness, at the launch of the ESRI Report on Cross-Border Mobility on 18 September 2023, to support efforts to enhance cross-border mobility, and we recommend that this be explored further with DFHERIS. Possibilities include a specific portal, funded workshops, and more.

3. Modern Languages

The uptake of modern languages at GCSE level is, in common with the rest of the UK and in stark contrast to the uptake at Leaving Certificate, extraordinarily low in NI at just 2.9%, 2.9% and 4% for French, German and Spanish respectively. This compares to 38.9%, 15.1% and 15% respectively in the Leaving Certificate.¹⁰ The system in the Republic currently accepts a language at GCSE from A Level candidates where this is a matriculation requirement, and it is recommended that this be maintained. The point was made in consultation with Northern Irish partners that as a European-facing state and EU member, the Republic would not wish to move away from the current approach to languages and, as such, there is an issue for NI to address. This was accepted by them.

4. Release of Results

The delayed release of results, at a time when the UK A Levels Boards and other countries' systems have gone back to normal, is a negative factor in respect of mobility from North to South, because students in the North are often sitting for weeks with a UK offer already in the hand and thus will feel compelled to accept that, including putting a deposit on accommodation etc. The delay impacts negatively on the ability to secure accommodation in a difficult market in the Republic.¹¹ We urge strongly that the Department of Education ensure a return to the normal Leaving Certificate results release date, both in the interest of Cross-Border mobility and also in the interests of the Leaving Certificate students.

14 Dec 2023

¹⁰ Smyth and Darmody, *Student Mobility in Ireland and Northern Ireland*, p. 14.

¹¹ British Council Ireland, Policy Insight: *Higher Education Mobility UK Ireland*, p. 13, at: https://www.britishcouncil.ie/sites/default/files/final_british_council_irl_he_mobility_research_sept23_0.pdf.

WG Membership

Galway	Prof. Pól Ó Dochartaigh (Chair)
UCC	Danielle Byrne
Maynooth	Prof. Aidan Mulkeen
Ulster	Prof. Paul Seawright/Rónán Cullen
UCD	Jill O'Mahony
Queen's	Roisin McEvoy
Limerick	Dr Laura Cahillane
Trinity	Dr David Shepherd
DCU	Georgina Roberts
TU Dublin	Bob Ó Mhurchú
Open Univ.	John Darcy
Galway	Michelle Ní Chróinín (Secretary)