

**Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation  
and Science**

**Date: Wednesday, 27<sup>th</sup> February 2024 at 12.30hrs**

**Venue: Committee Room 2, LH2000, Leinster House**

**Opening Statement**

**North South Cross Border enrolment**

**Introduction**

Mindful of the restoration of the Northern Ireland Government and Assembly, the Department welcome this opportunity to update the Committee on the progress made in respect of the key recommendations contained in the Joint Committee report entitled “*North South Student Enrolment in Tertiary Education*”.

These recommendations continue to inform actions undertaken by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

At the Joint Committee hearing (14 October, 2022), the Minister provided a full response to each of the recommendations. Noting also that the Minister have provided interim updates in other engagements with the Committee, this Opening Statement provides a formal and complete update on the recommendations as appropriate.

**Recommendation 1:** *Insert specific objectives for the State Bodies Governing Further and Higher Education to increase student enrolment in Ireland*

**Recommendation 2:** *Set Government targets for cross-border enrolment in Further and Higher Education;*

As previously noted, the Minister is reluctant to set targets for cross-border enrolment, as there are a myriad of reasons informing student choice, such as programme suitability and geographical access availability.

However, since 2022, the Higher Education Authority Act 2022 is now law, and it provides that the Authority shall:

*“promote co-operation and collaboration with regard to higher education (including with regard to the provision of student places and the enrolment of students) with authorities having responsibility for higher education in Northern Ireland, including the promotion of co-operation between designated institutions of higher education and institutions of higher education in Northern Ireland,”* (Section 9 (1) (q))

Separately, in July 2023, the Minister allocated more than €2 million to support higher education students in Northern Ireland to avail of mobilities and internships across Europe, which delivers on an Irish Government commitment to ensure students in Northern Ireland can avail of mobilities after Brexit. Both Ulster University (UU) and Queens University Belfast (QUB) were allocated €1 million each, while Stranmillis University College was allocated €50,200. Finally, North West Regional College, as scheme coordinator for the Regional Colleges, was allocated €175,000 for students pursuing HE programmes there.

It should be noted that at least 20% of the mobilities funded will take place in Ireland.

The Minister has secured €2 million to fund mobilities in the 2024/ 2025 Academic Year.

**Recommendation 3:** *Engage in extensive outreach and promotion to raise awareness of all education options across the island;*

The Department has engaged with Institute of Career Guidance (ICG), and while they acknowledge that more work can be done in this space, they are confident that their members in schools along the border are able to support all options for their pupils including opportunities in NI institutions.

The ICG have recently reported the following North-South initiatives with the Northern Ireland Schools and Colleges Careers Association (NISCA)

- (a) A UU presentation at the plenary session of the 2023 ICG conference was very well received. The potential of the North West Tertiary Education Cluster was highlighted, based on the capacity of the four partners - Atlantic Technological University, UU, North West Regional College and Donegal ETB.
- (b) The President of the IGC attended and took part in the discussion of the launch of the ESRI Report on *Student Mobility in Ireland and Northern Ireland* in September 2023, as well as the launch of British Council Ireland the official launch of the *Higher Education Mobility: UK Ireland Research Report*.
- (c) The ICG President and a member of National Executive Member attended the 2023 NISCA Conference in Belfast.
- (d) Two members from NISCA have been invited to the 2024 ICG Conference, which will be held in MTU Tralee in March.

The ICG is also investigating the possibility of setting up a joint working group of NISCA and IGC members who could meet regularly and pass on their deliberations to the IGC National Executive and the NISCA Executive as regards developing appropriate material for sharing with Leaving Certificate and A Level students.

**Recommendation 4:** *Adjust Grade Equivalency and Entry Requirement;*

In November 2023, a Working Group which was established under the aegis of Universities Ireland, concluded its review of the CAO points equivalencies for A Levels. Noting

- (a) The desire to increase mobility on a North-South basis, and,
- (b) The need for NI students to undertake 4 A Levels, including 3 A\* to achieve 600 points, the Working Group has recommended changes to the equivalencies. These will allow an A Level student with 3 A Levels, and an AS (Advanced Subsidiary) qualification, or an Extended Project to achieve maximum points.

The Working Group recommendation has been adopted for implementation for the 2024 intake by a number of universities, while the remaining institutions will implement this for the 2025 cohort.

**Recommendation 5:** *Ensure Consistent Supports and Pathways regardless of jurisdiction*

There is no update on this recommendation, given that the work undertaken by the Department as part of its Brexit preparations. This includes an amendment to the Student Support Act 2011 which provided for the payment of SUSI grants to students from Northern Ireland who wish to

pursue their undergraduate studies in Ireland. In addition to maintenance support, they are also eligible to free fees, in accordance with the Free Fees Scheme.

**Recommendation 6: *Provide a Brexit Guarantee***

Officials from the Department continue to engage with their counterparts in the UK Department of Business and Trade on the question of professional qualifications, with further meetings planned in the coming months.

**Recommendation 7: *Deliver on Commitments made in New Decade New Approach***

Following extensive interaction by DFHERIS with UU, the NI Department for Economy (DfE) and other stakeholders, the Irish Government agreed, in July 2023, to a proposal to co-fund the construction of a new 5,000m<sup>2</sup> teaching and student services building on the Derry campus.

This teaching block building will provide additional lecture and seminar spaces, computer labs and on-campus student services. It will also free up 1,000m<sup>2</sup> in other buildings which will be repurposed as labs. The project is part of UU's 6 building campus development plan to deliver the physical infrastructure to bring student numbers from 5,250 currently in Derry to a potential 6,500.

The Irish Government will fund up to 85% (£38.25m) of the construction cost of the teaching building on the Derry campus through an allocation of up to €44.5m from the Shared Island Fund. UU has committed to funding the 15% balance (£12.75m) as well as any cost overruns. It estimates a 48 to 60-month construction period, subject to award of planning permission.

DFHERIS officials continue to engage with UU Senior Management on this project. UU are currently undertaking a number of pre-planning exercises, in advance of an anticipated submission of a planning application in Q4, 2024. It is estimated that the planning process may take up to 12 months.

**Recommendation 8: *Increase Investment in North-South Research and Development***  
**North-South Research Programme**

As previously noted, a total of sixty-two collaborative research projects between academics and institutions in Ireland and in Northern Ireland were awarded a total of €37.3 million under the first funding call from the North-South Research Programme, with awards ranging in value from €200,000 over two years to €4 million over four years are to be made to successful collaborations under three strands.

The HEA have undertaken a review of this call, with a view to maximising the impact of a second call. Discussions are currently underway between the Shared Island Unit in Department of Taoiseach, DFHERIS and the HEA to design the optimum approach to a second call, which is likely to take place in Q2, 2024.

**CoCentres Programme**

There has been extensive engagement between research funders and officials in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Great Britain to define the areas of synergy and alignment with NI and Ireland priorities, and the identification of way to progress the establishment of research hubs in a collaborative way.

The outcome of this process is the establishment of the Co-Centres programme. In November 2023, Minister Harris and Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology Michelle

Donelan and Permanent Secretary at Northern Ireland's Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Katrina Godfrey announced €70 million in joint funding to create two new research centres.

The funding will bring together academics, industry and policymakers across the Irish Government, UK Government and Northern Ireland Government Departments to collaborate on common challenges such as food sustainability and climate change.

Details associated with the co-centres are as follows:

*Co-Centre for Climate + Biodiversity and Water:*

Vision: To be a home of research, innovation, and policy development across the interlinked challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, and water degradation. This will be achieved through research to enable fair transformations to Net Zero, reverse biodiversity loss, restore water quality and ensure resilience for communities and a sustainable economy.

Number of research performing organisations: 14

Number of researchers: 64

Leadership Team: Trinity College Dublin, Queen's University Belfast and University of Reading

*Co-Centre for Sustainable and Resilient Food Systems:*

Vision: To develop innovative and transformative solutions to transition the food system for positive and sustainable change in the transition to climate-neutrality by 2050. In order to address specific challenges centred around food system integrity and resilience, food safety and healthy diets from sustainable sources, the Co-Centre proposes to undertake a research programme across 4 platforms – Sustainable Food, Food Safety and Integrity, Nutrition and Health, and Food Systems Data Modelling. End-to-end solutions from soil-to-society will be developed and showcased.

Number of research performing organisations: 15

Number of funded researchers: 68

Leadership team: University College Dublin; Queen's University Belfast and University of Sheffield.

The Co-Centres programme is funded over six years, with up to €40 million from Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) (supported by this Department, and the Irish Government's Shared Island Fund), up to £17 million from Northern Ireland's Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and up to £12 million through UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), and is co-funded by industry.

Funding of the two Co-Centres began on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2024 and both Co-Centres are ramping up activities. Furthermore, SFI is working with each of the Co-Centres on their naming/titles and branding.

### **Recommendation 9: Provide Sustainable Fund Levels for Higher Education**

In May 2022, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science published *Funding the Future*, a policy framework on the future of funding for third level education in Ireland. €307m was identified as the quantum of increase in core funding required to deliver enhanced performance, strategic reforms and strengthened quality of outcomes.

Budget 2024 saw an additional €65 million in core higher education funding, on top of €40m secured in Budget 2023, which brings the total additional core funding to €105m.

This funding is facilitating the recruitment of additional staff to enhance academic tutoring, engagement and support services for students. This will contribute towards lowering the staff/student ratio and bring Ireland closer to international norms in this area.

**Recommendation 10:** *Bring forward a New Student Accommodation Strategy*

The Government approved the Long Term Student Accommodation Policy on 16th January 2024. The long term vision is to ensure that availability of accommodation does not act as a barrier to accessing higher education. The policy aims to free up private rental accommodation by providing student specific alternatives. This dual benefit policy will make fit for purpose accommodation available for students and therefore increase housing availability for private individuals and families.

The policy will inform the development of the Student Accommodation Strategy and associated schemes which will be further developed throughout 2024 in consultation with Government colleagues and stakeholders. It includes a number of measures to increase the supply of accommodation, through all forms of tenure recognising the various needs across the regions. These include examining transport links and viable commuting options, and progression of standardised design templates for student accommodation. The standardised design project aims to lower the cost of PBSA delivery and consequently the rental rates for students.

Building on the short term activation measures, State funding could be provided to further support HEI owned development. State investment would be in return for a percentage of beds being made available long-term at below market rates for target students.

The refurbishment of vacant properties for student accommodation will have a significant impact in the regions and will further our balanced regional development agenda. Refurbishment of vacant commercial property will also be considered in addition to repurposing vacant properties on HEI land.

The use of digs/rent-a-room scheme will continue to be promoted. This measure is of particular importance due to the ongoing constrained supply of private rental accommodation and the use of student accommodation as temporary emergency accommodation for Beneficiaries of Temporary Protection and International Protection.

This vision will be pursued through the following policies:

- (a) Increasing the supply of student accommodation and relieving pressure on the private rental sector
- (b) Supporting balanced regional development and the TU Transformation Agenda
- (c) Enabling supply of new below market rate accommodation for target cohorts
- (d) Reducing cost of delivery of new Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) through Standardised Design.
- (e) Promoting efficient use of existing housing stock
- (f) Examining commuting alternatives to accommodation close to campus

Funding of €1m was approved in November 2022 to assist the TUs in developing a student accommodation programme which is based on a regional needs and feasibility assessment. Phase one of this study is complete (supply and demand analysis). This phase has produced an initial database of current supply and projected demand to inform the Student Accommodation Policy and Strategy. Phase two will design and assess a framework for student accommodation in the TU sector. In January, the HEA issued correspondence to the TUs to progress the development of student accommodation proposals by end Q1 2024.

In the interim, the Department has worked to activate existing planning permissions secured by third level institutions, including:

- (a) The development of up to 1,000 student beds across DCU (phase 1), Maynooth University, UL and UG with €61 million in funding approved in principle by Government.
- (b) Engagement with D/PENDPR on proposals for UCD, which has planning permission for 1,254 student beds, Trinity College Dublin, which has permission for 358 beds and the second phase of DCU, which has permission for 830 beds.
- (c) Progressing a total of 521 units at DCU and Maynooth University, which are already at tender stage.

### **Recommendation 11:** *Increase Cross-Border Public Transport Links*

As the report acknowledges, the current strategic rail review is being undertaken by my colleague, Minister Ryan, and will support his efforts on this, particularly as it eases access to student mobility.

### **Conclusion**

The Department values the contribution and support of this Committee to its programme of North-South collaboration across the tertiary education system. North-South student mobility is often a precursor to deeper collaboration between further and higher education institutions.

This is vital not only to our shared economic prosperity but to the underpinning of peace on this island.

**Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science,  
21 February 2024**