

Opening statement to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

We are delighted to be addressing the Joint Committee today. Here we would like to highlight a number of key issues emerging from our research on the potential barriers to cross-border student mobility.

Drawing on administrative data and stakeholder interviews, our study shows relatively low levels of undergraduate student mobility between Ireland and Northern Ireland. Those from Ireland make up 2.4 per cent of students in Northern Ireland while students from Northern Ireland make up only 0.6 per students in Ireland. More students from Ireland go to study in the rest of the UK than in Northern Ireland. There is also a relatively large outflow of students from Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK, reflecting a cap on the number of places in Northern Ireland and therefore high levels of competition.

Our study shows that these patterns of student mobility are influenced by differences in higher education entry requirements, the costs of studying and availability of places. A substantial proportion of applications to study elsewhere are for highly competitive medical-related courses, indicating the role of availability of places in driving mobility decisions.

Students from Northern Ireland can apply through the Central Applications Office (CAO) process. However, applicants need to take four A-levels to achieve maximum points and only a handful of students in Northern Ireland do so. In addition, the language requirement for many courses limits access for students from Northern Ireland where smaller numbers take a foreign language at A- or GCSE-level compared to the number of Leaving Certificate students.

Only a minority of applicants from Northern Ireland or Britain make it all the way through to being offered and accepting a place in Irish higher education institutions, partly because they are less likely than those from Ireland to meet minimum entry requirements. However, even when offered a place, those from Northern Ireland are less likely to accept the place. This may be because they are using an application elsewhere as a safety-net in securing a high-demand course and/or they receive the offer later for Ireland than for UK universities. Similarly, acceptance rates for UK universities are lower for Irish applicants than for those from the UK.

The decision to study elsewhere reflects the complex interaction of tuition/registration fees, financial supports and other living costs. Students from Ireland generally face lower accommodation costs by moving elsewhere, though a significant proportion of students have no such costs as they live in the parental home.

There is a case to reexamine CAO point equivalences for A-levels, as is being done by Universities Ireland, and to look at modern foreign language requirements, given these operate as barriers for candidates from Northern Ireland. School-based guidance could provide greater awareness of options in other jurisdictions, supported by ongoing outreach work by higher education institutions. 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 some financial supports are in place for students in both jurisdictions, there is a broader issue of the extent to which such supports cover the costs of participation. Stakeholders point to the value of mobility for students themselves, for higher education institutions and for enhancing cross-border cooperation, highlighting the importance of addressing these barriers.

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