

## **HEA Opening Statement**

### **Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science - Discussion on North South Student Enrolment in Tertiary Education.**

**27th of February 2023**

Chairperson and Members of the Committee

My colleagues and I are pleased to assist this Committee in its consideration of topics referred to in your letter of 02nd February last. I will comment on the progress by the HEA to address a number of the recommendations contained in your report.

As stated by my colleague Dr Vivienne Patterson last year, the Higher Education Authority Act 2022 includes an objective on the promotion of co-operation and collaboration with regard to higher education (including with regard to the provision of student places and the enrolment of students) in Northern Ireland and the promotion of co-operation between designated institutions of higher education and institutions of higher education in Northern Ireland.

There is a breadth of activities that underpin our cooperation with Northern Ireland including our data collection in relation to NI student enrolment in higher education in Ireland.

The HEA through its Student Record System collects student enrolment and graduate data from its higher education institutions on an annual basis. This data includes their domiciliary of origin and therefore the enrolment records of students from Northern Ireland enrolled in HEA designated higher education institutions is captured in the system.

In 2022/23, there was a flow of 1,660 NI students to Irish HEIs.

By mode of study, 59% were full-time students and 33% were part-time students. 8% were remote students. The overall numbers enrolled has remained relatively steady over the last 5 years.

The majority of NI students studying in Ireland are undergraduate at 76% and are predominantly studying Business Studies, followed by Health and Welfare and then Arts and Humanities.

In the academic year 2022/2023 79% of NI new entrants entering Irish higher education institutions enrolled in Dundalk Institute of Technology, University of Galway, Trinity College and University College Dublin. If Atlantic Technological University is included, the figure is 87%.

The HEA manages a number of funding initiatives for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. These initiatives either partly or fully promote cross border activity in Tertiary Education and Research with an aim of increasing student enrolments and industry collaboration.

Supported by funding provided of €250,000 by the HEA in 2018 the Cross-border FE HE Partnership was established, involving the Ulster University, LyIT/ATU, North-West Regional College and Donegal Education and Training Board. This funding contributed to the development of a coordinated academic plan that exploits opportunities for collaboration and study pathways for students in the region and the development of a regional FE/HE prospectus.

With the assistance of funding provided by the HEA from the TU Transformation Fund, ATU has supported among other activities:

- Collaboration with NWRC to deliver a 15-week bridging course in Electric Vehicle programmes across Donegal ETB, NWRC, and ATU Donegal. This involves the sharing of facilities and staff to reskill mechanics for electric vehicles developing a pathway from L6 to L7 in EV Technology.
- The development of a proposal to the Shared Island Unit to deliver on a Skills Escalator and Research Centre that will support upskilling and reskilling of individuals and support innovative enterprises in the region.
- The establishment of a cross border working group.

HEA Landscape funding in 2019 provided €500,000 for the Smart Industry Northwest City Region. This funding contributed to providing clear cross-border Smart Industry learning pathways for students/learners from foundation level and the establishment of Smart Industry Research Studentships.

In addition, HEA Performance Funding in 2019 awarded to Letterkenny Institute of Technology, now ATU, supported a project aimed to support high value employment opportunities and data science support for industry in the region, particularly in ICT and FinTech. Research connections with regional industry and enterprise were developed through this project, which established knowledge transfer connections with the FinTech Industry in the North West Region by providing data science and research support to enterprises through a cross-border Data Science Research Centre, AI NoW.'

Supported by funding provided by the HEA, DKIT is working with FE and industrial partners to identify opportunities and pathways towards achieving sustainable objectives and talent retention, facilitating the growth of industry within the North East Leinster-South Ulster region by increasing the number of highly qualified graduates that are available to both attract multinational organisations to the region and satisfy the demand of local organisations.

In 2021, the Shared Island Unit allocated €40m to the North-South Research Programme (NSRP) over 5 years, which is being delivered by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) on behalf of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science (DFHERIS).

Following a very successful first call in 2021, which received 367 eligible applications, 62 projects were funded across 3 strands to the value of €37.28m (including HEA co-funding), with project implementation having started in September 2022.

Projects are strengthening links between higher education institutions, research communities, and researchers across the island of Ireland by delivering all-island approaches to research and innovation through a lens nuanced by the objectives of the Good Friday Agreement, Sustainable Development Goals, the National Development Plan 2040, and the strategic development of research and higher education.

Over a period of 4 years, Strand II Department to Department projects, focusing on the establishment of 'Emerging Hubs of Excellence', will support 35 PhD students – whereas 18 PhD students will be linked to Strand III Institution to Institution projects, contributing to building 'Partnerships of scale'.

Furthermore, smaller Strand I Researcher to Researcher projects with a maximum 2-year duration will include 14 Masters Students and 3 PhD Students.”

In addition to the collaboration between Higher Education Institutions, all NSRP projects were encouraged to establish links with relevant third-party collaborators such as NGOs and charities (49%), hospitals (11%), SMEs (7%), state agencies (2%), and other public institutions.

The report of this Committee also recommended the provision of sustainable fund levels for higher education. In 2023 €40m was provided for Funding the Future towards addressing this shortfall. The first tranche of funding in 2023, allocated by the HEA through the block grant, focused on improving the staff student ratio in universities & specialist colleges and building leadership capacity in the technological sector and also provided funding to enable expansion of technological sector research mission.

In 2024, a further €65.2m will be provided under Funding the Future. €60m will be allocated by the HEA through the block grant and €5.2m will be allocated towards sustainability of existing medicine provision.

The expectation is that the majority of this funding will be dedicated towards strengthening institutional performance in Funding the Future priority areas, in particular:

- The recruitment of additional staff to enhance academic tutoring, engagement and support services for students. This will lower the staff : student ratio and bring Ireland closer to international norms in this area
- Continued implementation of the National Access Plan to improve participation and success by non-traditional groups in higher education
- Enhance the embedding of digital, transversal and sustainability skills across programme offerings.
- Expanding pathways for learners through development of further tertiary programmes in priority areas for enterprise and the public service.
- Addressing research overhead funding gaps to support a more sustainable and high-quality research system

The 2023 and 2024 funding increases the Funding the Future allocation to €105.2m.

Finally, in addressing the recommendation on additional student accommodation, as the Committee is aware, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) launched a long-term policy on student accommodation on 19 January 2024. This policy aims to deliver an increased supply of student accommodation across Ireland in order to relieve pressure on the private rental sector. The new Strategy for Student Accommodation is also due to be published this year.

As a short-term response to the difficulties being faced by students in securing affordable student accommodation and the challenges being faced by the Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) trying to build develop student accommodation, the HEA is assisting DFHERIS is seeking proposals from the TU sector for new supply of student accommodation and a key objective of these projects will be to provide affordable accommodation.

The HEA's legislation provides opportunities for further collaboration with the Tertiary Education Sector in Northern Ireland. The HEA looks forward to enhancing our collaboration through a range of initiatives as discussed.

We look forward to your questions and a discussion on these matters with the Committee today.