



## **Submission to Seanad Special Select Committee on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union**

### **1. Introduction**

The Irish Universities Association (IUA) represents the eight universities – Dublin City University, Maynooth University, NUI Galway, TU Dublin, Trinity College Dublin, University of Limerick, University College Cork and University College Dublin. More than 150,000 students are enrolled in our universities representing over two-thirds of undergraduates and 80% of post-graduates in Irish third-level education<sup>1</sup>. Our universities play a central role in the economic, social and cultural life of the nation. They feed the talent pipeline for the growing knowledge economy. They are centres of creativity and learning. They generate cutting-edge research and innovation. They nurture culture, heritage and sports. They support communities and regions.

Our universities account for 90% of all Research and Development expenditure in higher education. The total annual contribution by the universities to the Irish economy is close to €9 billion. They are key employers with almost 20,000 staff and a further 6,000 jobs indirectly supported. They are centres of economic and regional growth with key industry clusters such as ICT, pharma, agri-food and med-tech centred around or closely linked with our university network.

This submission deals with the impact of Brexit on the university sector across the areas of student mobility, funding, research, and alliance building.

### **2. Student Mobility**

#### *NI, GB, EU students*

The numbers of students from Northern Ireland studying in the Republic of Ireland had slowly decreased during the 1990s and 2000s. The desire to change this resulted in a series of collective and individual attempts by universities, and as a result, the numbers of applications from Northern Ireland began to grow as we emerged from the 2008-2012 economic downturn. Applications, however, plateaued in 2016 and 2017 and then dropped substantially following the Brexit referendum in the UK. These have now stabilised at around 1,300 applications each year and, indeed, show some hopeful signs of increasing.

The numbers of applications from Great Britain have continued to fall however until this year. 2021 preliminary CAO application data shows the first increase in applications from Great Britain since 2015. These tentative signs of increased interest by applicants from Northern Ireland and Great Britain to study in Ireland may be due to a reduction in other opportunities

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<sup>1</sup> HEA Facts and Figures

for UK students as a result of Brexit, and a sign that post-Brexit Ireland is once again being considered as an option for UK students.

More than 120,000 non-UK EU students studied in the UK annually before Brexit. While these students paid high tuition fees, they had access to government grant/ loan funding to assist with the costs, paid back on graduation. Access to this funding is no longer available and students who do not have the ability to cover the higher non-EU tuition fee will seek alternative destinations. The 2021 application deadline to the UK's Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) showed that the number of EU applicants stood at 26,010, down from 43,030 the previous year, a drop of 40%. Ireland should aim to be the preferred alternative destination for these students.

Ireland is the only EU country with an increase in applications in 2021 to study in the UK, with applications up 26%. This shows the importance of the re-confirmed provisions of the Common Travel Area for Irish students.

Initial CAO results show an increase in EU applications this year, presumably as a result of Brexit. International Offices across the universities are now looking at recruiting students from the EU, some for the first time. If resourced, with a planned and sustained programme of investment to refurbish existing infrastructure and build capacity, there is a significant opportunity to attract high quality students at undergraduate and postgraduate level. This would also provide a pipeline to PhD recruitment within universities.

#### *Erasmus+*

As a result of Brexit, outbound mobility to the UK from Ireland is no longer possible at the end of the current Erasmus+ contract. The UK is an attractive destination for students who do not have a second language and is generally less expensive than other English-speaking destinations. The new Erasmus+ programme will include non-EU mobility as part of the Key Action 1, which will hopefully mean equal funding for EU and non-EU mobility.

In late 2020, the Irish Government decided that students from Northern Ireland should be facilitated post-Brexit in terms of continued access to the Erasmus+ programme. This was discussed informally in advance with Irish universities and other higher education institutions (HEIs), who agreed to facilitate this by allowing students from Northern Ireland to register with them on a temporary basis. Preliminary discussions involving universities and HEIs both in Northern Ireland and in Ireland have taken place in recent months, to plan the arrangements for this.

In the meantime, however, the European Commission has informed all HEIs with unspent Erasmus+ grant monies since the onset of Covid-19 that these monies can be retained and used to fund mobilities for the coming academic year 2021/2022. As such, universities in Northern Ireland still have unspent Erasmus+ grant monies which we understand will be sufficient to fund planned student mobilities for 2021/2022. As a result, implementation of the Government decision has been deferred until September 2022.

The IUA is in close contact with DFHERIS to ensure that a workable system is in place to facilitate those students from Northern Ireland who wish to participate in Erasmus+ in

2022/2023. This needs to be administratively simple to operate and should be in place before the end of the 2021 calendar year, to allow students and universities to make the necessary arrangements.

#### *Recognition of professional qualifications*

As an impact of Brexit, the EU Professional Qualifications Directives no longer apply to the UK and to the recognition of qualifications covered under these Directives between the UK and EU Member States. This could potentially have major consequences for the movement of graduates between Ireland and UK, particularly in certain areas of the economy.

To ensure ongoing recognition of qualifications, professional regulators in Ireland and other individual Member States and in the UK are to continue to recognise current and future professional qualifications for their own professional areas, using Third Country recognition procedures, on an applicant-by-applicant basis. As before, this professional recognition does not confer an automatic licence to practice.

So far, this process has appeared to allow each Irish regulator to allow for the continued recognition of relevant UK professional qualifications as required. Some Irish regulators have updated their Third Country processes to ensure this can take place smoothly. It is crucial that attention continues to be paid to this issue and government support given if needed.

### **3. Funding and International Student Recruitment**

There are potential implications from Brexit for universities arising from increased costs and delays associated with goods and services procured from the UK. This may be particularly relevant to capital projects where significant materials and expertise are sourced from the UK. This increase may be as much as 15% on capital projects.

There may have been a perception that Brexit presented a significant opportunity for Ireland to pick up a share of the UK international student market as the largest remaining English-speaking country in the EU. The evidence doesn't appear to support this, with the UK putting significant efforts into retaining their share of the international student market and the English-speaking advantage being significantly diluted given the extent of programmes, particularly at postgraduate level, delivered through English across the EU.

Rankings are far more potent factors in attracting international students. The lack of adequate investment in the university sector over the last decade means that Ireland has lost ground in rankings and is not in a position to compete as effectively in the highly competitive international student market. This highlights the need for action on a sustainable funding model for Irish higher education.

In contrast to a sudden and significant drop in EU applications to study in the UK, there has been a 17.1% increase in applications to study in the UK from students in non-EU countries around the world. This highlights the challenges facing Ireland in seeking to maintain its attractiveness as a destination of choice for international students from the rest of the world.

The IUA universities account for over three-quarters of the international students in higher education in Ireland. This 20,000-strong cohort of students generate tuition fee income of c. €250m per year and generate over €400m in total export earnings to the Irish economy.

It will require a concerted effort to maintain the competitive position of Irish universities in attracting international students post-Brexit and post-Covid-19. International student fee revenue is particularly important in that, given the significant cumulative reductions in state funding to the university sector over the last decade, this income is used to cross-subsidise the costs of Irish students. Without the income from international students, the universities will be unable to offer the same quality and experience to our domestic students.

#### 4. Research

The UK is Ireland's most significant partner in terms of research output as measured by co-authored research publications, and is Ireland's third most prevalent collaborator in EU research programmes, accounting for 10% of all collaborations under Horizon 2020.

There are a number of negative impacts for research as a result of Brexit, including the loss of strategic UK partners and alliances and the challenge of finding replacement partners among EU Member States. However, it also presents potential opportunities to recruit more outstanding talent, from senior academics through to PhD and undergraduate students, from the UK and internationally. High-quality human capital and our capacity for innovation are central to Ireland's international competitiveness and our knowledge economy.

A Brexit-driven augmentation of our home-grown talent with additional excellent academics and students from across the globe, would present a significant boost to Ireland's standing and performance. To capitalise on this opportunity however, Ireland must be an attractive place for the brightest minds to decide to move here. While it is helpful that we are an English-speaking country, many other factors come in to play including the cost and availability of housing, transport, childcare and education/ schools.

For researchers and top academics, a national funding system that values basic, discovery research alongside applied research is of paramount importance. Additionally, such talent expects to work in labs/ facilities that are at least on a par with those they are leaving behind. There need to be sustained opportunities for advancement across the research pipeline, including grants for all career stages so people can see how they can build their future here.

Due to underinvestment in recent years, the Irish research system is now regarded by some research leaders as inferior to most major competitors. Research funding invested in Ireland substantially lags behind our counterparts at European level. Government Budget Allocation for Research & Development (GBARD) has been consistently below 1% of total expenditure since 2012, reaching a low of 0.93% in 2018. This is well below the EU average for GBARD of 1.34% of total government expenditure and almost half that of key competitor countries such as Denmark. An additional €350m per annum is needed to bring Ireland into line with the EU average. Such investment is critical if Ireland is to compete effectively with other nations for talent and innovation and capitalise on opportunities in a post-Brexit environment.

The Shared Island agenda is a priority for the Irish Government. Over half of Northern Ireland's drawdown from Horizon 2020 comes from North-South collaborative projects. Recognising these close collaborative ties, there is now a real opportunity to establish an island of Ireland network of research and innovation investments at scale. These investments would bring significant socio-economic benefits and facilitate talent and skills development, which would also strengthen North-South linkages and the island of Ireland's place in the globally competitive higher education environment.

## 5. Alliance Building

Alliance building is a major challenge for Ireland in the EU post-Brexit, and depends on being highly connected and engaged across each of the other remaining 26 Member States, as well as in Brussels. Higher education, research and innovation are positive and fruitful areas where Ireland can take a lead on co-operating at European level. Alliance building is not limited to government or parliamentary relationships, and the universities have a pivotal role to play. As evidenced in the Bologna Process Implementation Reports, Ireland is already a leader when it comes to many aspects across the European Higher Education Area. There is an opportunity to build on the high-esteem in which we are held.

The European Universities Initiative (EUI) represents an unparalleled opportunity to do this, for Ireland to deliver on a range of strategic priorities, and for Ireland to be at the centre of informing European policy on the future of the European Education Area and the European Research Area. Irish institutions are prominent in the pilot phase of the European Universities Initiative, with 8 Irish HEIs, including 5 IUA universities, involved in 8 of the 41 alliances. Irish partners are seen by others as attractive and we could grow this position into one where we are leaders in several of the European Universities which will ultimately be established.

However, the issue of sustainable funding is a major issue for Irish participants in the EUI. Ongoing EU funding is vital but is less than what is needed to make the alliances a success. Dedicated national funding to support Irish HEIs' involvement in the EUI is required, as is received by EUI participants in a number of other EU Member States.