

Opening Statement for Seanad Special Select Committee on the Withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union

31 May 2021

Cathaoirleach and Members of Seanad Éireann, the HEA and the Erasmus+ National Agency would like to thank the Select Committee for the opportunity to present today on areas of higher education impacted by the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union.

1. Erasmus+

a) Ireland - UK Mobility Flows

Ireland and the United Kingdom joined the European Union in 1973 and in 1987 were among the first 11 countries to participate in the Erasmus Programme along with Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, France, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. The Higher Education Authority has been the National Agency for the Erasmus Programme from its establishment in 1987.

In 2020, the United Kingdom withdrew from the Erasmus+ programme but it will continue to send and receive students and staff until 2022/2023 under agreements signed before the end of 2020. This measure was introduced by the European Commission as a response to the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. HEIs in NI have taken up this option and a number will continue to send and receive students until 2023.

As the Erasmus+ National Agency for Ireland at the HEA, we facilitated the extension of agreements to 24 months which means that nearly all of our HEIs will be able to send and receive students and staff to the UK until May 2022.

These options were open to all Erasmus+ Programme Countries (EU28 + 6 Associated Countries) and do not relate to the withdrawal of the UK from the EU.

Mobilities between Ireland and the UK are significant and for a number of HEIs, the traineeship option, particularly when located in London, is very attractive. In 2019, a total of 355 students and staff undertook mobilities to the UK. This represents roughly 9% of total outbound student numbers for that year.

Table 1: Ireland - UK		
Action	2014	2019
Study Visits	90	129
Traineeships (Placements)	237	210
Staff Visits	30	16
Total	357	355

Table 1 shows that 129 Study Visits were undertaken in 2019. In this year, 10 different Irish HEIs had a partnership relationship which enabled these mobilities to take place with 38 different HEIs in the UK (GB only). For these mobilities to take place, an inter-institutional agreement has to be agreed with each UK partner. This is not an insignificant detail as it indicates the large measure of trust and co-operation that has been established between the partners. These collaborations are often the foundation for research, teacher and staff mobility and other collaborations. This relationship has grown and developed over the 33 years that both countries were members of the Erasmus Programme.

The UK was the most attractive destination for Irish students who undertook Erasmus+ traineeships. In 2019, 210 students chose the UK with 48% of this number taking up positions in London. For institutions like GMIT (39), UL (29), NUIG (27), LIT (21), NCAD (16), WIT (14), TU Dublin (11) – traineeships afford access to leading hotel chains, restaurants, businesses, catering, construction companies, fashion and design – invaluable experience to have on any graduate CV.

Table 2 captures the mobility flows from the UK to Ireland. While the numbers are lower than the Ireland-UK pattern, the trajectory is upwards with a 25% increase recorded in 2019 compared to 2014.

Table 2 UK – Ireland		
Action	2014	2019
Study Visits	50	69
Traineeships	24	34
Staff Visits	14	7
Total	88	110

b) North-South Erasmus+ Student Flows

Just over 600 students undergo Erasmus+ mobilities from higher education institutions in Northern Ireland. Uniquely 68% of the cohort undertakes traineeships (internships). The prevailing pattern for Erasmus+ Programme (EU28 + 6 Associated Countries) in 2019 was 70% study visits; 30% traineeships.

There are four main providers of outbound Erasmus+ numbers in NI accounting for 96% of total mobilities. Of the 426 students who undertook traineeships in 2019, 280 (66%) came south – of that figure 192 (66%) were located in Dublin.

After 2023, NI students will no longer be able to undertake mobilities to ROI or any other programme country under the Erasmus+ Programme.

Erasmus+ Outbound Numbers from NI HEIs by Study Visits (SMS) and Traineeships (SMP)			
2019	Study Visits	Traineeships	Total
QUB	90	274	364
UU	57	133	190
Stranmillis UC	25	0	25
St. Mary's UC	27	0	27
FE Ballymena	0	14	14
FE Portadown	0	4	4
FE Omagh	0	1	1
Total	199	426	625

2019 Erasmus+ Outbound Numbers from NI HEIs by Top 5 Destinations - Traineeships		
2019	Destinations	SMP
1	Ireland (ROI)	280
2	Spain	71
3	France	31
4	Italy	6
5	Netherlands/Hungary/Finland	4 (12)
Total		400 (94%)

The number of students moving from South to North is very modest. In 2019, the total number undertaking traineeships was 37 – mainly from GMIT (14), AIT (5) and ITS (5).

c) The Future

The withdrawal of the UK doesn't totally remove the UK from the Erasmus+ Programme. There will be one area where the UK can participate.

1. Irish HEIs can choose to spend 20% of their intra-European mobility budget on sending students to the UK in its new designation as a Partner Country. The HEIs can also choose other countries on all continents for this action. At the moment this is not reciprocal action.

The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science announced in 2020 his intention to provide funds to enable the continued participation of Northern Ireland students in the Erasmus+ Programme. Discussions on the implementation of this decision will resume later this year with the intention of introducing the initiative from September 2022.

2. Cross-Border Student Flows

The Cross-Border Project Team – Project Eleven chaired by the Director of the Centre for Cross-Border Studies has sought to address the following objective *“Cross-border co-operation and undergraduate mobility between institutions in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are important from an economic, social and cultural perspective. Such activity has the potential to drive the growth of the all-island economy, broaden the pool of graduates both north and south and support the ongoing peace process. The Department is committed to supporting cross-border co-operation in teaching and learning, with the aim of increasing understanding, sharing good practice and enabling students to move freely between the two jurisdictions. The Cross-border Project Team will therefore take account of all relevant information, research and other developments in providing strategic oversight to the implementation of Project Eleven.”*

Much work was done on sharing information and examining student flows but more remains to be done. The Project Team includes representatives from both jurisdictions including the HEA, THEA, the Department for the Economy (NI) and a number of HEIs from both sides of the border.

Full-Degree Student Flows on the island of Ireland		
Year	North-South	South-North
2010/11	1049	4280
2015/16	1191	2195
2019/20	1588	2085

While the number of students from the south enrolling in northern HEIs has fallen from a high of 4280 in 2011, it is significant that over 47% of the 2019 figure of 2085 registered students are pursuing graduate programmes. The comparable figure for northern students in southern HEIs is 19%.

3. Research

Under the terms of the EU-UK Trade and Co-operation Agreement signed on 30 December 2020, the UK will remain in the €96bn Horizon Europe Research Programme (2021-27).

Much useful work was done in the period up to 2020 in terms of underlining the all-island importance of higher education and research. The Royal Irish Academy and other stakeholders played and will continue to play a crucial role as a bridge for discussion and activity in this critical area for both jurisdictions.

The Irish Research Council (IRC), which operates under the aegis of the HEA, has a strong relationship with the UK. In the region of 70% of its peer reviewers, who assess applications for funding, are UK-based academics.

In response to Brexit, the IRC established a funding programme with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). This collaborative funding programme aims to provide support for social science networking activities, with the broad

objective of fostering excellent Irish-UK synergies and building bridges between these two research communities.

4. Full Degree Mobility between Ireland and the UK

A Memo of Understanding (MoU) on the Common Travel Area (CTA) was signed between the Government of Ireland and the Government of the United Kingdom in 2019. The MoU acknowledged the importance of education noting that “the CTA affords Irish and British citizens the right of access to all levels of education and training, and associated student support in each other’s State on terms no less favourable than those for citizens of that State.”

Therefore, the landscape as not changed for students from Ireland who travel to the UK for full degree programmes.

5. UK Turing Programme

The UK Government has introduced its own study/work abroad initiative called the Turing Programme as a replacement for the Erasmus+ Programme. This differs in a number of ways from the Erasmus+ programme:

The Turing Programme:

- Supports only outbound students from Higher, Further, Vocational and Schools education sectors.
- It is not reciprocal i.e. it doesn’t support inbound mobilities.
- It does not support Staff mobility

HEIs who intend to participate in the Turing Programme had to apply for inclusion by 9 April 2021. Decisions to be made in the coming months.

Tim Conlon, Head of Policy and Strategic Planning
Gerry O’Sullivan, Head of International Education
Dr. Aileen Marron, Erasmus+ Programme Manager

ENDS