

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS, BREISOIDEACHAS AGUS ÁRDOIDEACHAS, TAIGHDE, NUÁLAÍOCHT AGUS EOLAÍOCHT

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, FURTHER AND HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, INNOVATION AND SCIENCE

Dé Máirt, 21 Feabhra 2023

Tuesday, 21 February 2023

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 11 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 11 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Rose Conway-Walsh,	Eileen Flynn,
Jim O'Callaghan,	Pauline O'Reilly.
Pádraig O'Sullivan,	
Aodhán Ó Ríordáin.	

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Patrick Costello.

Teachta / Deputy Paul Kehoe sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: Good morning everyone. I remind members to make sure that their mobile phones are turned off for the duration of the meeting as they interfere with the broadcasting equipment, even in silent mode. Are the minutes of our meeting of 14 February agreed? Agreed.

North-South Student Enrolment in Tertiary Education: Discussion

Chairman: Today we will have two sessions, the first of which begins now. On behalf of the committee, I welcome Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh, president of Universities Ireland, Mr. Paul Hannigan, head of college at the Atlantic Technological University, ATU, representing the Technological Higher Education Association, THEA, and Mr. Lewis Purser, director of teaching, learning and academic affairs at the Irish Universities Association, IUA. Our guests are here to discuss North-South enrolment in tertiary education, a topic on which Deputy Conway-Walsh has done a lot of work. The Higher Education Colleges Association, HECA, was invited to attend but declined due to other important business.

I also welcome from the Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee for Education, Ms Aoibhinn Treanor, committee clerk, Mr. Mark McQuade, assistant committee clerk, Mr. Jim Nulty, clerical supervisor, and Mr. Joshua Devlin, clerical officer, all of whom are in the Public Gallery. You are all very welcome. I know you will be meeting our committee secretariat and members later on for further deliberations and lunch.

The format of the meeting is that I will invite the witnesses to make a brief opening statement, in the following order: Professor Ó hÓgartaigh, Mr. Hannigan, and Mr. Purser. This will be followed by contributions and questions from members of the committee, who will have five minutes each. As the witnesses may be aware, the committee will publish the opening statements on our website.

I remind members of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. Witnesses are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable, or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of a person or entity. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in respect of an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed by the Chair to discontinue their comments. It is imperative that they comply with such direction from the Chair.

I invite Professor Ó hÓgartaigh to begin his opening statement. Each witness has five minutes to make their opening statements and we this will be followed by questions from committee members.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: Go raibh maith agat a Chathaoirleach. I am President of Ollscoil na Gaillimhe, University of Galway and of the Universities Ireland Council. I thank the committee for the invite. Go raibh maith agaibh as an gcuireadh. I am pleased to represent Universities Ireland here as we have a particular role in encouraging cross-Border co-operation in higher education, including student mobility. There is a preamble in the statement about

what Universities Ireland does more generally which I will take as read in the interests of time.

We welcome this discussion with regard to North-South student mobility. More generally and further, we support an enhanced interest and support for North-South co-operation in higher education and research. With that in mind, we have recently written to the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Innovation, Research and Science in the Republic of Ireland, and to the Permanent Secretary for the Department of the Economy in Northern Ireland to support the inclusion of higher and further education in the scope of work and the areas of co-operation of the North-South Ministerial Council. Higher and further education are not currently within the scope of work of the North-South Ministerial Council and we believe that many of the issues raised here could usefully be discussed at the North-South Ministerial Council and facilitated there.

We particularly welcome and commend the committee's interest in and report on North-South student enrolment in tertiary education, which I will refer to as 'the report' hereafter. We particularly welcome the stakeholder engagement outlined on page 31 and the evidence base provided throughout. As people who are interested in evidence we are particularly encouraged by that. As we will all agree education, and higher education in particular, brings communities together and facilitates a shared understanding. It is a common good, a public good, to promote peace and prosperity to the benefit of all our communities, North and South. There is strong evidence that student mobility, for example in the Erasmus and other international scholarship programmes, contributes meaningfully to peace and prosperity through a shared understanding and appreciation of difference as part of our common humanity.

It is also important to note in that context, and as a group of universities working together, that we don't see this as a competitive context, hoping to attract more students to the Republic of Ireland from Northern Ireland or *vice versa*. Rather, and critically, we see this as a co-operative setting where we work together to further enhance peace and prosperity, social and economic development, as well as student choice, and the island of Ireland's collective competitive position as a destination of choice in research and teaching. Therefore, we encourage the committee to see support for student mobility as a two-way street, i.e. South to North as well as North to South, and to the extent that it can, seek to influence policy-making with that in mind.

As members of Universities Ireland, we see clear opportunities for North-South student and faculty mobility, joint research, and a shared engagement in critical areas of interest and complexity for us all, for example such as climate change, health, human rights, security and food security, and conflict, peace and reconciliation studies across all our institutions. We also note that our members, universities across the island, are also providing short focused courses for students and employers, supported by funding from both the Higher Education Authority, HEA, and, separately, the Northern Ireland Executive. There is increased interest in and demand for microcredentials which could usefully be included in the scope of the report and in the committee's deliberations.

The report has a number of considered recommendations. We look forward to discussing and engaging with these in greater detail. I will provide an initial response to each of them in turn:

The first recommendation is to task the HEA and SOLAS with the promotion of cross-Border student enrolment. We agree that this is worth raising with the HEA in setting a general context for cross-Border student mobility. It is also worth noting that students ultimately consider enrolment in a university setting rather than in a jurisdiction, so that while the HEA

can play a role in supporting the broader context each institution also has a role to play in this regard.

The second recommendation is to set Government targets for cross-Border enrolment in further and higher education. While targets are necessary to set objectives and measure progress against those objectives, achieving those targets depends on a much broader and complex set of circumstances, such as those set out in the recommendations of the report.

Third, the report recommends a promotion and outreach campaign run in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Executive. We agree and look forward to supporting such an engagement. Our sense is that engagement with school guidance counsellors would be critical in this context as they play a particularly important role in supporting student choice. Such a campaign could also usefully better inform students about programmes available in each jurisdiction not available in the other so that students could be attracted across the Border in that context.

The fourth recommendation is to adjust grade equivalences and matriculation to support cross-Border enrolment. There is evidence that A-Level grade equivalences are anomalous and should be reviewed. I think this is a critical part of our support for the recommendations. While the work originally carried out in this regard, which set the equivalence, looked at the numbers achieving various grades at A-level versus the leaving certificate, that work did not appear to take account of the different A-level and leaving certificate completion rates, North and South. These differences are further exacerbated by evidence of a higher Covid and post-Covid grade inflation in the leaving certificate than in the A-levels. Given that university entry requirements are properly a matter for universities, I will add this to the agenda of our next Universities Ireland council meeting with a view to establishing a timely review and the progressing of any necessary adjustment as proposed. This could include a review of the language requirements discussed on page 18 of the report.

We agree with ensuring consistency in access to supports and pathways for students enrolling cross-Border. The extension of SUSI support to the payment of tuition fees to the four approved institutions in Northern Ireland, as is currently the case for postgraduate studies, is a matter for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Skills. In passing, a larger reform agenda of SUSI noted in the report is also to be strongly welcomed to ensure that students in need receive the support necessary to continue their studies. I would advocate very strongly for this.

We agree with providing a Brexit guarantee to give certainty to all current and prospective students. Further certainty and detail in this regard would greatly support cross-Border mobility and the ability of students to plan in that regard. With regard to the Erasmus+ programme, further detail of the mechanism by which this would operate would be welcome. While likely dependent on broader EU considerations, the reciprocal arrangement for students studying in Northern Ireland outlined on page 21 of the report is to be welcomed, as it is consistent with the spirit of the Erasmus+ support provided via Republic of Ireland institutions.

Regarding delivering on commitments made in New Decade, New Approach, this is a policy decision but we note that it refers to supporting one member of Universities Ireland.

We strongly support increased investment in North-South research funding, given the importance of research at scale in addressing societal issues. We encourage a competitive, multi-institutional and multidisciplinary approach to such investments. We particularly support the potential for increased levels of funding “specifically for analysis of all aspects of North-South

relations, cooperation and integration”, as suggested on page 29 of the report. This does not only have a direct and positive impact on North-South relations and on our communities North and South. It also has the potential to be internationally impactful and distinctive, given our shared experience on the island of Ireland.

We also encourage the committee to consider support for east-west research partnerships between the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Great Britain as a means of fostering a parity of co-operation across jurisdictions and between our different communities.

On the timely implementation of a sustainable funding model for higher education, we strongly agree that many of the proposals outlined in this report will be contingent on putting a sustainable funding model in place for third level education. The implementation of those funding commitments, as outlined in the Funding the Future document, must be the first step towards ensuring the higher education sector is adequately funded.

Staff-student ratios, SSRs, in British universities are as low as 12:1. They are significantly higher in the Republic of Ireland and will remain higher even with the investment envisaged in Funding the Future. The student experience is defined by many things, none more so than SSRs. Increased investment in higher education is, therefore, a prerequisite for a student experience that properly and decently serves and invests in student mobility and our students.

In relation to publishing a new student accommodation strategy, the availability of student accommodation is a complex issue Europe-wide. It is not confined to the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. We also note that relative wage rates and, consequently, differing purchasing power North and South, render the Republic of Ireland less affordable for students from Northern Ireland. In that context, we acknowledge the work done to date in this regard and support the further development of a new student accommodation strategy to deliver affordable accommodation, North and South, particularly for students in need. We have advocated strongly for this.

On increasing cross-Border public transport links, we join the committee in welcoming the current strategic rail review which is being conducted on an all-island basis. We also agree that more progress is needed with regard to public transport links, particularly outside the eastern rail corridor between Belfast and Dublin. We also support such initiatives in the light of the urgent need for climate action.

In conclusion, we welcome this report and the committee’s interest. Fáiltimid roimh a dtuairisc. We look forward to working with the committee and policymakers more generally in advancing our common interests in and for our students, North and South.

Go raibh maith agaibh arís. Tá me ag súil le díospóireacht agus ceisteanna mar is dúil daoibh.

Mr. Paul Hannigan: On behalf of the Technological Higher Education Association, THEA, I thank the committee for the invitation to meet today. While this is an issue of general concern, it has been exercising those of us located in Border regions more than others. My current role is head of college of Atlantic Technological University, ATU, Donegal, but I also have cross-university responsibility for cross-Border relations. In a past life, I worked in Dundalk Institute of Technology for ten years and I was born in Ballyshannon, County Donegal, four miles from the Fermanagh border. The Border has always been part of my life. I was one of the stakeholders that Deputy Conway-Walsh spoke to in preparation of the committee’s paper and was happy

to share my experiences. In preparing for this meeting, in addition to the committee report I have consulted *An Analysis of Existing Statistics on Student Flows between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in Higher Education*, published by the HEA, the then Department of Education and Skills and the Department for the Economy in December 2018. While this report is somewhat dated, taken along with the committee report and recent data from the CAO it shows that increasing cross-Border student mobility remains a significant challenge.

The perspective from a Border region is important in this discussion, particularly from a location where tertiary education providers are located in close proximity to the Border. The Border has disconnected such providers from their natural hinterlands. It is evident that educational participation is an area where cross-Border mobility is inhibited, with other sectors such as employment, retail, health and leisure having a significant cross-Border dimension. In my college the percentage of staff with Northern Ireland addresses dwarfs the percentage of Northern Ireland students enrolled with us. We can be assured that barriers to cross-Border student mobility are real given that the people in Border communities have found them difficult to navigate.

I congratulate the committee on this comprehensive report and its achievement in distilling a complex matter in a concise and understandable document. The 11 recommendations, if addressed, will help ensure that student choices are less influenced by which side of the Border a student is born on and is schooled.

Other elements that are important to consider include the recognition of further education and vocational awards in a cross-Border context. The real complexity in the qualifications frameworks in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland is found below the level of the traditional university degree. Achieving clarity in mutual recognition of these awards is critical in ensuring progression pathways are navigable on a cross-Border basis. These further education and vocational awards are central to the upskilling and reskilling of employees for Industry 4.0 roles and the new skills needed to address the climate challenge.

In the north-west city region of Letterkenny, Derry and Strabane, the four tertiary education partners - the Atlantic Technological University, ATU; Ulster University, UU; North West Regional College, NWRC; and Donegal ETB - have established the north-west tertiary education cluster, NWTEC. One of the objectives of this cluster is to remove both the real and perceived barriers to cross-Border student mobility. The cluster is also actively involved with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the shared island unit in delivering on commitments made in the New Decade, New Approach, NDNA, agreement. Meeting the commitments under NDNA will require a significant investment across the region in addition to the UU Magee campus.

Through the NWTEC collaboration we have been working with stakeholders to better meet the needs of our cross-Border region. It is important that tertiary education partners supporting stakeholders, including enterprises in the region, have access to the funds that will break down the historical disadvantage in these Border communities. I ask the committee to recognise the lead role that the NWTEC has had in promoting cross-Border tertiary education collaboration and its potential to improve the levels of cross-Border mobility for students. The cluster has received helpful early-stage funding from the HEA and the Department but now requires longer term support to continue this work and funding to expand its research capacity.

In February 2021, the NWTEC established a smart industry board, SIB, aimed at giving a strong voice to industry in the region while ensuring it is not duplicating but adding to the work

of stakeholders on both sides of the Border. The SIB was established to complement the work of existing regional groups, including the Derry City and Strabane District Council's education and skills delivery partnership. The SIB will achieve its aims by being driven by industry representatives from both sides of the Border; identifying current and future needs informing education, research and training provision; comprising industry representatives, tertiary education providers, local authorities and skills forums on both sides of the Border; initially addressing demands from the industry sectors of ICT, engineering and tourism as reflected in the board's membership; and being a vehicle for supporting the promotion of the north-west city region as an attractive place to work, live, learn and invest.

ATU Donegal hosted a successful smart north-west conference on 7 October 2022 on behalf of NWTEC to showcase and share the collaboration taking place in the north-west city region and foster greater cross-Border collaboration to drive regional economic growth. The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, outlined Irish Government plans for a unified tertiary education system and commitments to supporting education collaboration on an all-island basis. The Minister in his address to the conference was supportive of the key role that the NWTEC has played in cross-Border collaboration. He set out five priorities for his Department in terms of the all-island agenda: cross-Border apprenticeships; medical education on a cross-Border basis; all-island research centres; ATU providing new impetus to achieving more on cross-Border collaboration; and delivering on commitments made under NDNA. Among these priorities, the Minister directly challenged ATU, given the unique region it serves and the history of cross-Border collaboration of its constituent colleges, to bring a new impetus to cross-Border engagement.

I welcome the establishment of the new national tertiary office, which will be important in supporting collaboration between further education, FE, and higher education, HE, and the provision of degree programmes where learners commence in FE and finish their degree in HE. This offers a glimpse of a model that could be extended for cross-Border awards and reflects a further development of a collaboration that ATU and NWCR have for early childhood health and education programmes. I also wish to congratulate Dr. Fiona Maloney on her appointment this week as the inaugural director of the national tertiary office and her extensive experience of the sector makes her well-placed to succeed in breaking down barriers between FE and HE.

Mr. Lewis Purser: The IUA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the discussions on North-South student enrolment and recognises that significant barriers to progress remain in the HE system in the Republic of Ireland, where our eight member universities are located. IUA universities have a long history of contributing to peacebuilding and cross-Border co-operation on this island and, therefore, we recognise the need to develop a more strategic approach to North-South student enrolments, as well as wider co-operation across higher education activity.

Recent funding initiatives in research and innovation to assist in addressing societal and economic challenges on our island have provided renewed opportunity for collaboration across academia, both North and South. Similar initiatives to address wider student enrolment issues would be welcomed. The passage of the recent Higher Education Authority Act 2022, with outlined responsibility to promote North-South co-operation, could provide a new strategic impetus to address some of the challenges that I will outline in this opening statement. Furthermore, the move by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, to create an integrated tertiary education sector in Ireland is an opportunity for enhanced cross-Border student mobility.

Strategic decision-making on cross-Border enrolments has been hampered by the under-

investment in HE over the past decade. Delivery on Government's commitment of an additional €307 million annually to bring HE funding back up to the level required for a globally competitive and knowledge-based economy will go a significant way towards ensuring that the university sector can meet the challenges and opportunities of increasing North-South enrolments. Underinvestment has likewise reduced the capacity of the sector to engage in outreach activities, which are required if we are to attract significant numbers of students from Northern Ireland.

In addition, as noted by the committee's recent report, differences in the upper-secondary education and examination timelines constitute a barrier, and this has been significantly exacerbated by the continuing delays in releasing leaving certificate results since 2020. Even pre-Covid, there was a tight window between leaving certificate results and acceptance of course places in the Republic. The timelines operated by the State Examinations Commission do not allow the CAO and Irish universities to make earlier offers, resulting in difficulties for Northern Ireland applicants with A-levels, but also causing significant issues for leaving certificate students seeking to secure a place in a Northern Ireland university, or anywhere outside of Ireland, in a timely manner. This lack of alignment between leaving certificate and A-level timeframes means that applicants from outside the State are significantly disadvantaged in this process and will have received offers to universities in other jurisdictions first. Consequently, it is no surprise that the conversion of Northern Ireland applications to admissions has fallen significantly. Without real co-operation cross-Border and a commitment to reforming leaving certificate examinations and results timeframes, any real progress will remain hampered.

As noted in earlier hearings of the committee, and evidenced by HEA and CAO data, cross-Border undergraduate student numbers continue to decline. The most recent CAO figures for Northern Ireland applicants are included in appendix 1 of my statement. A significant proportion of students from Northern Ireland attending higher education largely attend four of the universities in the Republic: Trinity College Dublin; ATU; University College Dublin; and University of Galway, along with Dundalk Institute of Technology. Among IUA members, at undergraduate level, Northern Irish students are concentrated in high points courses in the health sciences, business management, arts and social sciences.

It should be noted that the combination of higher points applications to universities in urban areas with acute accommodation shortages is a key factor in low levels of conversion from applications to acceptances. The rising cost of living, coupled with unprecedented accommodation and travel costs, will undoubtedly continue to depress potential student enrolments in our universities from Northern Ireland. The IUA has called for additional capital investment to support universities to provide increased student accommodation.

Co-operation on the North-South research programme, funded by the shared island unit, demonstrates that progress can be made if system-level funding and supports are in place. Of the funded projects, 19 have included PhD student places, helping to grow the number of post-graduate research students cross-Border. This is an important area of focus post Brexit, given the challenges for colleagues in the North on research collaboration and funding. A further area where there is scope for development is in the strengthening of guidance support to potential students, with relevant and up-to-date information on possible pathways and opportunities.

We welcome the ongoing work by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on a single portal for career guidance, as well as the work spearheaded by the Department of Education on a lifelong guidance framework. These projects provide an opportunity to include North-South considerations.

For North-South enrolments to improve funding must be increased to build capacity for greater outreach work in Northern Ireland and *vice versa*. The delayed timelines for leaving certificate results must be addressed urgently, and a strategic system-level vision is required to support the universities to attract students from Northern Ireland. The Shared Island research programme should be expanded with further postgraduate places. The accommodation and cost-of-living issues need to be addressed for Northern Irish students, as for all students, if the barriers to entry are to be overcome.

With the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement approaching it would be a valuable opportunity for the Government to set out a plan for increased North-South student mobility and for higher education to play a greater role in cross-Border co-operation. I thank the committee. I look forward to any questions and to contributing to the discussion.

Chairman: I thank the three witnesses.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank the witnesses for their contributions and for giving their time to this crucially important report. We recognise that there is universal support for this approach. The HEA Bill and North-South student mobility requires us all to go further.

What are the next steps that should be taken by the HEA and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to increase the number of cross-Border enrolments?

While colleges should be financially capable of conducting their own research, is there also a benefit to the HEA, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Department for the Economy in the North to centrally co-ordinate the outreach and to explain the different system in the South of the CAO and SUSI?

How great an impact do the time imbalances have? I suggest that the committee should write to the State Examinations Commission and to the Minister to highlight the issue that exists. How many fewer applications do the HEAs in the South receive as a result? We will have some indication on that from the figures in the past two years.

The CAO is a not-for-profit company established by the higher education institutions, HEIs, in the South. Could the IUA or the members of the HEIs make the necessary changes or request a review of the current practices? How would such a review and reform be initiated? Could a solution specific to the North be considered, based on promoting integration on the island, even if the wider approach of A-levels is seen as operating fairly in regard to Britain?

Has the UI received a response to its very good proposal to the Minister and to the permanent secretary at the Department for the Economy? If so, would Professor Ó hÓgartaigh be able to share the response with the committee?

I commend the work that has been done by the north-west tertiary education cluster. I watch it to see how it is evolving. I know some information has been outlined, but what is specifically needed, even in the short term, to ensure that it continues to grow? Could the witnesses provide more detail on the mutual recognition awards, in particular below degree level?

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: I will start in reverse order. Mr. Hannigan will address the question on the recognition of awards below degree level.

The letter to the North-South Ministerial Council has just been sent so we have not yet

received a response. It is clear that it depends also on what happens at Stormont and with the Executive there as what happens there will impact on the North-South Ministerial Council. We believe a particularly important initiative that could be taken in the context of the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement is extension of the scope of the work. Education clearly has benefits that are cross-community. It is largely uncontroversial to have that as part of the work. We have not yet received a response. That letter was sent just last week.

On equivalence of recognition, the CAO is effectively the entry requirement, as I said, for universities to consider. It is also a bilateral matter. It is not only for IUA members but members of Universities Ireland in the North to consider how we translate A-levels to leaving certificate and *vice versa*. I put that on the agenda of our next meeting and we will progress it. I have already spoken to our registrar, Professor Pól Ó Dochartaigh, who was the chair of the CAO and represents the University of Galway on the CAO. He is open to that and to thinking about how the original analysis was limited by not looking at participation rates, as I mentioned, North and South and how those might change.

The Deputy answered her question around next steps for the Department. That research and analysis would be very useful. On how we might work together in promoting North-South mobility and where the key pinch points are, we believe guidance counsellors are critical. Where we find ourselves in schools across communities, we could encourage guidance counsellors to encourage students to think more about those options. Cross-Border is the first step. The second, as Mr. Purser mentioned, is the investment that was committed to under Funding the Future, which is critical to parity of experience throughout the island of Ireland. Third, the Department has a particular role to play in that North-South ministerial element. The Minister also has a role to play. That third piece is about whether an Erasmus-type funding programme would be considered. Students going from Ireland to the EU get Erasmus funding and scholarships. It would be very interesting to see whether there could be support for something similar North-South. It might be for a semester or a year but it would certainly increase mobility, which is the purpose of the report. The three elements are research around what the pinch points are; support through the North-South Ministerial Council; and investment, particularly in-----

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: In fairness, we know what the pinch points are. We can only continue to look at those pinch points for so long. We have to look at where responsibility lies for us to free up those pinch points. That is what the committee is trying to do. We will have an action report out of this to-----

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: The Deputy identified school presence. Cross-Border equivalence is the other element, which is for the universities to think about. We have committed to putting that on our agenda. The pinch point the Department could think about is how we encourage guidance counsellors in schools, and have a sectoral and not just institutional approach to that, which the Department and HEA could encourage.

Mr. Paul Hannigan: I will follow up on that point. The cluster has just put in place a competition for a cross-Border engagement officer to do exactly what the Deputy talked about, namely, to identify the obstacles and remove them among the four partners in the north-west tertiary education cluster. If that happens and it works, there is no reason that approach could not be used elsewhere as well. The four members of the cluster have come together and the person who will be appointed, hopefully in the next fortnight or so, will report to all four members of the cluster rather than one institution. Therefore, there is a responsibility on them to identify where there are obstacles for each of the four partners. That is very important to how we move it forward. We can do that and make the outcomes available to others in the university system.

It applies to everybody. If we can simplify the situation, identify the obstacles and provide ways of removing them, that will be a good piece of work. This post has been put in place for a 12-month period to trial it, and to see whether it works and has an impact. That is a direct outcome from the work of the north-west tertiary education cluster.

To go back to the Deputy's point about sub-degree work, in the past and currently, all the further education colleges in Northern Ireland had higher education provision to a certain level. Students would then proceed to the University of Ulster or Queen's University Belfast to finish their qualifications. We specifically identified with North West Regional College where it did not have progression routes for students. If they did not have a progression route into the University of Ulster in Derry, we offered the progression route in Letterkenny. We therefore created a flow of students coming across the Border from Northern Ireland into the Republic to top off their degree programmes. That has worked effectively in several areas and it can be expanded to others. We are currently considering the area of electric vehicles. Amazingly, the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland has come on board to fund that in recent weeks. We have put a bridging programme in place to allow students to come from Northern Ireland, totally funded, through a programme provided by us and the North West Regional College to move into a degree programme in ATU Donegal. These things are possible. If one gets the right people together in the right place at the right time, one can make it work. Through the north west tertiary education cluster, we are trying to continue to promote good practice and the best way forward. We are running on fumes at the moment in terms of making this happen, however. This was set up initially back in 2018. It was funded through the HEA landscape funding and additional funding came through in the second phase of that. We also received funding from the technological university transformation fund, TUTF, as the ATU was established. We need bridging funding to keep the programme and the momentum around it going. As the person with responsibility for cross-Border collaboration from the university's perspective, I am conscious that this needs to be a central plank of our ongoing strategy. The university is very committed to that and the work of the cluster will drive that activity.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Great. It is a human experiment. It is really valuable in terms of transitioning what has been done in the north west across the island-----

Chairman: As we are under time pressure, I want to allow in the other speakers. We will have a second session. Mr. Purser may respond briefly.

Mr. Lewis Purser: As regards the immediate steps, I fully support the remarks of my colleagues. The most important thing is for the Department of Education to signal clearly that the ongoing delays in the publication of leaving certificate results will be remedied. It is probably too late for 2023 but those signals need to go out now to encourage students who will be doing their A level exams in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in 2024. The Department must give a commitment to providing an improved timeline. It also needs to outline clearly that it will bring the profile of leaving certificate grade results back to a pre-Covid norm. That has happened in all other European Union countries and the various jurisdictions or education systems within the UK. This is important in the context of rebalancing A level equivalences to leaving certificate points. In a fluctuating situation where leaving certificate points continue to be inflated, it is very unfair for applicants applying with other types of systems. We have had no indication yet from the Department of Education as to when leaving certificate points will return to pre-Covid normality or, indeed, if they ever will. It is very difficult to calibrate between two different systems in that complete absence.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I thank the witnesses for their opening statements. The

conversation thus far has been particularly interesting. The point in respect of the leaving certificate results timetable is a very strong one. A message needs to go from the committee that it is in agreement with Mr. Purser in that regard. We have had several years of turbulence in the context of the leaving certificate. Much of it relates to availability of markers and so on, but it was a disappointment to many people in the system that the leaving certificate results are to be released at the same time as they were last year. That causes difficulties, as Mr. Purser outlined strongly. He will have a lot of agreement from this committee on that point.

I want to get the witnesses' reflections on two main points. The first is the school completion rate in the North compared with that in the South. An ESRI study published in 2022 indicated that the proportion of 16- to 24-year-olds who leave school with, at most, a lower secondary qualification is 14% in the North, compared with 6% in the Republic. The rate in Northern Ireland is two to three times higher than that in the Republic. Why is that the case? How can it be addressed? The school completion rate in the Republic is reasonably high, at 91%. In disadvantaged schools, it is 85%. It compares quite well across the European Union. In the North, however, there seems to be an issue. I ask our guests to enlighten us as to the possible reasons for that.

An interest of mine is access to primary school teaching. In order to access primary school teaching in the Republic, a student needs to have taken higher level Irish for the leaving certificate. People do not need higher-level English or maths, but they need higher-level Irish. I am of the view that the entrance requirements for primary school teaching in the Republic should be changed. It is the standard of Irish one might use in the classroom on exiting primary school teaching college which would be of greater value than that which one has on entering.

I assume it would be disadvantageous to somebody in the North who went to a school where Irish was not necessarily taught or prioritised. Are we disadvantaging students from the North who wish to train in primary school teaching in the Republic because of the Irish language requirement?

I agree with the comments on the timetable for leaving certificate results. School completion in the North is at a lower level than that in the Republic. Can the witnesses reflect on that for me? The Irish language requirement for primary school teaching, and other courses, is an issue. I ask that we focus on primary school teaching if we can.

Mr. Paul Hannigan: I will address the access issue. When I went back to work in Letterkenny in the late 1990s the completion rate for the leaving certificate in County Donegal was around 75%. It is now well over 90%, one of the highest rates in the country. A lot of that improvement was due to the fact that parents who had left school early were making sure that their children would not do the same. There was a change in culture and a recognition of the power of education and what it can do for people. Opportunities were created by higher education after that. The main focus was on keeping people in school, finishing their qualifications, getting through and moving onto the next stage. Perhaps elements of Northern Ireland are in that development stage at the moment. That is all I can offer in terms of consideration on that.

I am sure that regionally completion rates are very high in certain areas of Northern Ireland, but not in others. It is a case of recognising the power of education, what it can do for people and the opportunities it creates subsequently. That is well learned in a lot of parts of the Republic at the moment and has led to very high completion rates at second level and very high transfer rates into higher education.

Mr. Lewis Purser: The leaving certificate completion rates were significantly lower prior to the 2008-09 crash. As a result of that crash, in particular the disappearance of unskilled jobs in the construction sector, the attainment and school completion rates of young men in the Republic of Ireland increased significantly and have stayed at that increased level despite the economy roaring back subsequently. That was a real step change that took place. I do not know the situation in Northern Ireland particularly well, but I understand that if we delve into the top level statistics and examine completion rates between different socioeconomic groups and communities we will see some quite strong differences which would support what Mr. Han-nigan was saying.

On access to primary education, I entirely agree with the Deputy. It is an anomaly. In all other courses the emphasis is on learning outcomes and what people can do at the end of a programme, as opposed to what they bring into it. To insist on a certain level of leaving certificate Irish in order to enter a programme is a complete anomaly and discriminates against a lot of applicants, including Irish people living in the country who may not have been born here and, therefore, did not take Irish as a leaving certificate subject.

It is not just entry to a bachelor of education qualification that is affected by this. We need more teachers in the Republic, but qualified teachers in the North, Scotland or wherever who wish to enter the profession cannot enter primary school teaching. They instead come in as special learning or classroom assistants, but are not recognised as qualified teachers.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: On the question on school completion rates, I am not *au fait* with the detail but Dr. Soares is here. I do not want to put him on the spot. The Centre for Cross Border Studies provides a secretariat to Universities Ireland. We might be able to find more detail on that because it is an issue that is close to all of our hearts in the context of participation rates more generally.

In the context of our statement, our sense is that one of the reasons there is an anomalous equivalence between A-levels and the leaving certificate is because the leaving certificate has a much broader population. A smaller proportion of the population study for A-levels, therefore there is less of a tail. We do not have the bottom quartile and so on that we have with the leaving certificate. We think that is one of the reasons the original study did not take into account different participation and completion rates. We need to look at that again and we will commit to doing that. At the risk of sounding like Father Ted, the requirement for Gaeilge is an ecumenical matter in a way because the Teaching Council decides what the requirements are for teachers. As a representative of Universities Ireland, I could not comment but it may be a matter the committee could raise with the Teaching Council at that level. We are committing to look at the language requirements more generally, which the report talks about, but language requirements for bunoidreachas or bunmhúinteoireacht are a much more complex matter than I could comment on.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I thank the witnesses for attending. We are discussing increasing cross-Border enrolment which has a significant benefit for children and students as it gives them additional options. I think we would all agree that it also has a societal benefit.

What level of awareness do students in schools in Northern Ireland have of the opportunity to study at third level in the Republic? Is it limited to certain schools because of tradition?

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: I think it is limited to certain schools. Coming back to the Gaeilge, we were just commenting outside that the University of Galway in particular

has done well in increasing numbers in recent years. That is partly because we have focused on Gaelscoileanna and are working with particular schools in Northern Ireland. Awareness is mixed for that reason. That is why a systemic view would be good. An important point from the Universities Ireland perspective is that this applies both ways. It would be of benefit for students from the Republic to study in the North and *vice versa*. The issue is the sense of what the opportunities are. There is probably a particular benefit in thinking about whether there are programmes and courses available in the Republic that are not available in the North and *vice versa*, so that mobility could be increased. I would say, however, that the level of awareness is mixed.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: With respect to the experience in University of Galway, did it go out to try to build up a relationship with Gaelscoileanna and Gaelcoláistí? If so, are there other groups that could be seeking to attract students here from Northern Ireland or cross-Border. Is that a role for career guidance counsellors or some other group?

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: We in University of Galway feel that guidance counsellors are critical. In preparation for today, I did some work with our access and student recruitment staff who say that guidance counsellors are critical in encouraging students and making the information available. Many of the other elements of the report the Deputy raised are also important, but we think guidance counsellors are critical in raising awareness.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: How does the Technological Higher Education Association attract students from Northern Ireland?

Mr. Paul Hannigan: We do a lot of recruitment work in Northern Ireland, targeting different schools from which we have a track record of attracting students. We use role models who have been through the process and we organise meetings with guidance counsellors from Northern Ireland on an ongoing basis.

An easy practical matter to consider is the application deadlines. The applications for the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, UCAS, in the UK, are due before Christmas and there is a lot of work involved for students in making their applications, such as writing their personal statements and so on. Then they are straight into the CAO system in January, heading for the 1 February deadline. In many cases, that is where people decide only to do one. They might decide only to apply to UCAS, that they have done their application, are finished and will not bother with the hassle of the CAO. There is no major hassle involved but that is the perception, that it is another thing to do. That is a practical issue. It would be useful if there was some mechanism to try to facilitate both systems to ensure people could comfortably apply for both.

The overall issue is that there are well-worn paths for students who go to certain colleges. They follow the people who have gone before them. When we go into schools in Tyrone and Derry, many students will say they are facing towards Belfast, as they have always done. That is the trend that has always been there. To get them to turn around and come back in the opposite direction towards us is a bit of a challenge. We have had success where students have come and been successful, and then returned to their old schools to show the path that is available. The use of role models and people who have taken well-worn paths works quite well, but it is still small numbers.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: I saw Mr. Purser was trying to come in. Does he want to contribute?

Mr. Lewis Purser: Yes, my contribution will be partly in response to Deputy O’Callaghan’s question and I will provide further information to follow up on a question from Deputy Conway-Walsh earlier. Since 2015, Trinity College Dublin has been operating what it calls a feasibility study with a special focus on encouraging applicants from Northern Ireland. In preparation for meeting the committee I talked informally with its officials and they provided me with some data. I am sure they would be happy to engage more formally, if the committee is interested. Its feasibility study effectively sets aside a number of places for applicants from Northern Ireland in all of its programmes at undergraduate level. I believe Deputy Conway-Walsh explored this programme as part of her study. Of particular interest is that Trinity College Dublin only requires three A-levels for applicants to those reserved places. This is where we see the importance of the whole guidance issue and the lack of guidance. Even Trinity College Dublin, with its reserve quotas, extensive historical networks in Northern Ireland and alumni networks, has been unable to fill those places. Indeed, the numbers of students coming from Northern Ireland more than halved between 2015 and 2022.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: Why does Mr. Purser believe that is? Traditionally many students from Northern Ireland came to Trinity College Dublin.

Mr. Lewis Purser: Absolutely. I am sure Covid-19 disrupted some of the outreach activities that were taking place as a matter of course. There is also the lack of knowledge of what it takes to apply, the fact that, as others have outlined, the timelines do not align, and the number of generations that have passed since people had first-hand knowledge of attending a college in the South and *vice versa*. The importance of guidance is fundamental in getting that back on track. However, even where some quite proactive measures have been taken by prominent institutions, from the data I am looking at, they do not appear to have had any significant effect.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: I would add that there is increasing evidence that university education is becoming increasingly localised. Accommodation and the cost of living are part of that. Part of the challenge is that students are less likely to travel. Galway for example has the highest proportion of students travelling to Galway of any university but also the highest proportion of first-generation students. This is clearly significant in the North-South context. We find that increasingly students are staying at home. Accommodation is a critical issue there, as is the cost of transport, which is mentioned in the report, and the ease of transport. There is a good North-South corridor, with the Belfast to Dublin railway line, but there is not to the same extent in the north west and west coast corridors.

Mr. Paul Hannigan: I can support that from personal experience. My son went to Queen’s University. He got an offer of his course on a Monday and straight afterwards - the next day - he got an offer of accommodation. That is a completely different experience from coming to study in the South. It has become a trend, a slow burn in terms of people looking at the availability of accommodation and also balancing the cost of the accommodation in the North versus the costs in the South. While there are slightly higher fees in the North, it balances out really quickly in terms of the overall accommodation costs.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: Has Mr. Hannigan seen more people coming from the Republic studying in Northern Ireland?

Mr. Paul Hannigan: I have seen it colloquially, as it were, among people I know. There seems to have been a move to Belfast in particular in the last couple of years. I believe that is purely down to the proximity to Donegal, and also accommodation availability, with accommodation provided by the universities as well. That is a real issue.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: When the papers publish the CAO data on the universities to which students go, it is clear in Border counties in particular that many students from Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal go north rather than south because of ease of access and locality.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I thank the witnesses for their contributions. Last week, when we discussed the same topic, I asked about the numbers of students going to the UK - Scotland, England and Wales - versus how many are going to the North. It seems to be either comparable or there are more travelling across the sea. I would be interested in the views of the witnesses as to what might be driving that. It is clear from the last comments that around the Border counties it makes sense for people to travel to the North. We have seen from the recent survey the lack of linkage culturally from the very south of Ireland with the North. There has to be some other reason. We can say all we like about how we would love to have more connections and how it builds peace and understanding. However, there has to be something in it for young people - not just young people - students have to get something out of it. Why are people going across the ocean rather than going north of the Border? I would be interested in the witnesses' thoughts on that.

Professor Ó hÓgartaigh mentioned the all-Ireland rail review and I am delighted he did. What would having that all-Ireland rail review published mean for the west of Ireland, particularly the links around our counties in the north west? He previously mentioned the traffic congestion around the university. What do we need to do to attract people to the university? Transport is part of it. I have spoken to many students in Donegal who might be coming to other parts of the country. The lack of transport links to bring people elsewhere is a real blockage from some of our counties in the north west – accommodation and transport. Those are my questions.

I was interested in the comments around grade inflation in relation to the leaving certificate. It did not impact on everybody and people have various views on it. However, that being a blockage for people who did A-levels is an important and interesting point for us. When we look at the education system at secondary level, we always should take into consideration people in the North of Ireland and how it might impact on those students.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: Why students go to Great Britain rather than Northern Ireland and *vice versa* is a complex question. For Northern Ireland students, I suspect it is a community issue. In other words, the community that a person associates or identifies with is an important part of that. The other piece I think comes down to what Mr. Purser mentioned and I am reluctant to mention, because every time university presidents come in front a committee we do not want to be looking for money.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: Money. I knew Professor Ó hÓgartaigh was going to say that. But it is important.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: It is inherently about it. I mentioned in our response that the staff-student ratio in GB and UK universities generally is 12:1. Even with the investment in funding for the future, which is aiming for about 15:1, it will still be higher here. There is nothing more that defines student experience, research and teaching than the staff-student ratio. One can talk about many other issues. However, I would simply say that the UK system - though it is not perfect and those within it would find many faults in it - has an international reputation based on a solid investment over generations that we have not yet had. I have often said, again this is putting on the Universities Ireland hat in a way, that the free second level education and the investment in education that came here in the 1960s is now bearing fruit. There is a new

opportunity now to invest further in the next generation, which is higher and further education. We await that ambition. We await that to come to fruition. If I was to put my finger on one thing, I would say it is that.

On the rail review, I will take off my Universities Ireland hat and put on my University of Galway hat. Many students, not only in Galway but generally, are now commuting because the cost of accommodation is so high. That means they are travelling a lot and do not have the same student experience as they otherwise should have. It is disruptive to their lives as students. Ease of access and ease of transport would facilitate that much better. Instead of Feda O'Donnell bus or cars leaving Galway on a Thursday evening, why not a train or another mode of transport? There is a theory in Galway, as the Senator knows, and I am sure it is the same in other cities, that part of the congestion is students commuting. Public transport is a key part of the answer to that not only in Galway, but cross-Border as well. The eastern economic corridor, from Belfast to Dublin, is well served.

As I said to the Chairman before the meeting, I was a member of an informal, non-statutory board of the Saolta University Health Care Group. When we looked at Letterkenny *vis-à-vis* Galway for healthcare, we found it was easier to get from Letterkenny to Dublin than it was to get from Letterkenny to Galway. That is an issue for regional development, whereby connections should exist between Letterkenny, Sligo and Galway, and public transport would be a key part of that.

On the question about leaving certificate equivalence, we fully agree. That has created an issue that may, simply, be one reason numbers have fallen in recent years. Leaving certificate points have increased as a consequence of grade inflation, whereas A-level grades have not increased to the same extent. That could be a very simple explanation for the numbers having decreased in recent years.

Mr. Paul Hannigan: I think there might be one other issue in the context of the mobility of students into Great Britain, namely, the lack of availability of places on various programmes here, whereby they choose to go abroad because they can get onto programmes elsewhere in some of the universities. They make that choice early. They will have made it before they apply to universities in the Republic of Ireland and, because of the way the system works, they will know at this stage whether they have an offer. The offer will be conditional on their leaving certificate results or whatever the case may be, but they will already have it. When students see others doing that, follow that track and see people who have gone before them, that will, obviously, open a route. We saw that in the case of veterinary medicine students in Poland recently, where a piece on the news showed the huge numbers of Irish students who are already in Poland studying that subject. They choose to go there because places are not available here.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: This has been a very valuable discussion and I thank all our guests for their contributions. On the €309 million gap, that needs to address the cap on high-demand courses such as veterinary medicine, medicine and so on, which I acknowledge the Minister is examining. We need urgent action on them to prevent people from being exported elsewhere. I will not discuss the issue further at this point, given I am sure we will have other discussions another day. I thank our guests for attending and for the contributions they have made.

Chairman: On the question of veterinary medicine and medicine, I understand the Department and the Minister are looking at this. I know of at least six or seven chaps from my local area who have gone to the UK and elsewhere in Europe to study veterinary medicine. That is

a shame because they do not come back. In order for such students to have the experience of studying and getting their education here, it is important everybody work together to ensure we secure more spaces.

Professor Ciarán Ó hÓgartaigh: Significant progress has been made on the number of medical places, although part of that relates to clinical and training places. Within the system, there is a desire to move on that. Part of it relates to investment, given in the case of some courses such as veterinary medicine and medicine, there is investment, especially capital investment, to be made to increase the number of places. There is a process now to increase the number of places in nursing, medicine and veterinary medicine, which the Deputy raised. She is correct; the danger for the island of Ireland in general is that if somebody leaves the country at undergraduate level, in particular, the evidence is they will remain there indefinitely. At postgraduate level, they are more likely to come back, but at undergraduate level, they will be abroad for three or four years and make a life there, and we lose people as a consequence. It is a significant issue that is broader than this one.

Without labouring the point, this comes back to investment, and it is not a cost but an investment. That is a critical aspect and we very much welcomed the report including that point. The committee could easily have disregarded that point but it is certainly an important part of the student experience.

Chairman: I thank our guests for attending and for the discussion in which they have participated. I also thank members. It has been a very productive meeting. The work Deputy Conway-Walsh has done will add to the contributions made by the witnesses who appeared before the committee last week.

Sitting suspended at 12.14 p.m. and resumed at 12.19 p.m.

Chairman: I welcome the witnesses to the second session. On behalf of the committee I welcome Dr. Anthony Soares, director, Centre for Cross Border Studies; Professor Gerry Mc Kenna, senior vice president, Royal Irish Academy; and Mr. Martin McKendry, college director, College Of Agriculture Food And Rural Enterprise. I also welcome Cónall Ó Corra from the Royal Irish Academy who is in the Public Gallery. The witnesses are here to discuss North-South enrolment in tertiary education.

The format of the meeting is that I will invite the witnesses to make a brief opening statement. This will be followed by contributions from members of the committee, who will have five minutes each. I remind witnesses of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. If witnesses' statements are potentially defamatory in any way, they will be directed by the Chair to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that witnesses comply with any such direction from the Chair.

I invite Dr. Soares to make his opening statement. I ask that he and the other witnesses keep to the allocated five minutes. This is the second session and members have other business to attend.

Dr. Anthony Soares: I am the director of the Centre for Cross Border Studies, based in Armagh, which was established in 1999 to become an authoritative advocate for cross-border co-operation and a valued source of research, information and support for collaboration across

borders on the island of Ireland, Europe and beyond. I thank the Chairman and members of the committee for the invitation to take part in this discussion on North-South student enrolment. I start by posing a question. Is there a shared understanding of the significance of North-South student mobility and of whether and why it should be encouraged and supported? Given that we are discussing North-South student enrolment, by a “shared understanding” I mean one that is arrived at by both Administrations on this island as well as by education providers and relevant stakeholders, including students themselves. I would argue that without such a shared understanding, it will be difficult to encourage and support increased North-South student mobility if, indeed, that is the desired outcome arrived at out of these discussions.

A clear signal that both Administrations recognise the importance of North-South student mobility and are committed to nurturing it would be to include co-operation on higher and further education within the remit of the North-South Ministerial Council. It would be the most appropriate platform from which the two Governments can ensure relevant policies and legislation in both jurisdictions are supportive of North-South student mobility. An existing example of this is the Higher Education Authority Act 2022. As recommended in the submission to this committee’s pre-legislative scrutiny of that Bill by Universities Ireland, which the Centre for Cross Border Studies, as the secretariat for Universities Ireland, prepared, the Act sets out that one of the functions of Higher Education Authority, HEA, is to promote co-operation and collaboration with authorities and institutions in Northern Ireland, “including with regard to the provision of student places and the enrolment of students”.

Equivalent legislative or policy prompts should be in place in Northern Ireland. This had been the case under Northern Ireland’s higher education strategy, *Graduating to Success*, but it has not been replicated in more recent policy documents. Education providers need a positive policy context and political backing to give them the confidence and, crucially, the accompanying resources to invest in the development of North-South student mobility. I would argue that they also need evidence that prospective students are aware of the opportunities that exist in the other jurisdiction and would opt to study there rather than going elsewhere. In addition, policy in this area needs to take account of and expand on what is already happening in regard to North-South student mobility, which can often happen as a result of bilateral initiatives between institutions or as part of wider collaborations, such as the cross-Border further and higher education cluster for the north-west city region.

I will not rehearse the potential barriers to North-South student mobility, which the committee’s recent report outlined. Instead, I finish by suggesting that we need to broaden the scope of North-South student mobility to include short-term mobilities as part of a student’s course, cross-Border apprenticeships and vocational courses and cross-Border work placements. We also need to think about the role of distance learning. Crucially, we must understand how trends in North-South enrolments fit into wider trends of flows in student mobility and the changing make-up of student populations in higher education institutions across the islands of Ireland and Great Britain.

Chairman: I thank Dr. Soares. The next speaker is Professor McKenna.

Professor Gerry McKenna: I thank the Chairman and members for inviting us to the meeting. We are delighted to be here. I am senior vice president of the Royal Irish Academy, for which the whole area of higher and tertiary education and research is a major interest and priority. Members will have received our written submission.

The academy established a task force on higher education in 2020. It comprised 37 indi-

viduals and received more than 100 submissions dealing with the future of higher education across the island. Submissions included statements and documents on vision, the future landscape for higher education, equality, diversity and inclusion; research and innovation, and, most important, regions and place. We were particularly concerned about the excess concentration of higher education places in Northern Ireland, particularly Belfast, relative to the rest of that part of Ireland. We were also concerned about the deficiency regarding the north west, which we define as the greater north west.

We welcome the inquiry into student enrolment and mobility. We made a detailed submission to the committee in December 2021. We had a substantive meeting with Deputy Conway-Walsh subsequent to that, and we have had correspondence in various forms subsequent to that.

I hope the benefits of North–South student mobility do not have to be stated again but clearly they are of great importance to the economic, social and cultural development of the island. With regard to peace and reconciliation, these benefits comprise a major supporting factor. Student flows from the North to the South and the South to the North should be relatively non-controversial. We have noted that the flows have diminished somewhat over recent years in both directions. The numbers have been static or going downward, despite the fact that there have been major flows from Northern Ireland to Great Britain. These flows are effectively the equivalent of another university, in fact. There are various reasons for that. The cap on student numbers in Northern Ireland is a major factor but it is not the only one.

We have outlined in our submission the issue of the equivalency of A-level and leaving certificate qualifications. The timing of CAO offers versus those of the UK’s University and Colleges Admissions Service, UKAS, and the extent to which students value the first offer they receive must be borne in mind. There is a relative lack of information from, and effort by, the southern institutions in respect of attracting Northern Ireland students. That is somewhat understandable given that they are oversubscribed in many respects and also given the lure of overseas students, perhaps. However, there is not a great emphasis in Northern Ireland schools on the attraction of studying in the Republic. We have made some points about open days and encouraging developments in that way. There are also issues to do with accommodation in the South. These issues are clearly a deterrent for people moving from the North to the South.

Another point we have mentioned in our report on regions and place concerns the limited co-operation and collaboration on further education between the North and South, particularly in the Border region, where there is a genuine opportunity to do things together. It has not been fully activated.

We also made a point about health courses. It is more about a South–North flow than a North–South flow. The fact is that previously a quite substantial number of southern students used to go to Northern Ireland to study a wide range of health-related courses, including biomedical science, nutrition, dietetics and physiotherapy, and then would go back to the Republic to work. However, under the regulatory arrangements that have developed in the South under CORU, which recognises courses and programmes, while it is possible for a student who has studied outside the Republic to be registered there subsequently, it is a cumbersome process and requires a lot of effort. That is a major deterrent to students from the South who wish to study in the North, even though the programmes are essentially similar and some of them were originally developed in the North. It is a huge barrier to student flows from the South to the North and, of course, it diminishes employment prospects in an area where there is a shortage of people. We have also made the point that we think the whole issue of North-South student flow is very important. We have mentioned particularly the north west. We made the point that

there really ought to be some effort in respect of PEACEPLUS to develop activities that would support that, particularly in the north-west region. We look forward also to the committee's subsequent work on postgraduate studies. We would hope that everybody would see the flow of students, North-South and South-North, as a priority which can only be of benefit to the island as a whole.

Mr. Martin McKendry: I thank the Chair for the invitation to speak to the committee today. First I would like to outline the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise, CAFRE's, role in the Northern Ireland education system, its governance structure and how it is used as a key policy lever in the delivery of Government policy. I will provide some key facts and figures about CAFRE and enrolment of students from the South on its courses.

CAFRE is the only land-focused college in Northern Ireland. It delivers further and higher education, knowledge transfer and innovation programmes across agriculture, horticulture, food, equine and rural enterprise. We have just over 2,000 students on our FE and HE programmes. We deliver those across three campuses in Antrim, Cookstown and Enniskillen. We also deliver knowledge transfer and innovation programmes to approximately 14,000 people who work within the agrifood industry.

Our corporate governance structure unique within these islands in that it is the only land-focused college that operates as a division of a Government Department. This means all CAFRE staff, including myself, are employees of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. I, as CAFRE director, report to the Deputy Secretary within the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, DAERA. The legislative basis for our programmes is provided by the Agriculture Act (Northern Ireland) 1949, which empowers DAERA to provide instruction in agriculture and related subjects. This means that we work quite closely with the Department for the Economy, which created the legislative framework for the FE colleges and for the funding of both further education colleges and higher education Institutions.

Given CAFRE's position in DAERA, the nature and content of its programme delivery is determined by the DAERA knowledge framework. This framework sets out the rationale for involvement in education, knowledge transfer and innovation and commits to improving educational attainment in the North's agrifood sector. It is underpinned by a range of principles including commitments to lifelong learning, accessibility, enhanced collaboration and partnership across the education sector.

In the history of CAFRE we have always had enrolments from the South on our courses, however this varies across the disciplines. Equine is by far the most popular, with students from the South comprising between 30% and 40% of our enrolments. However, over the last ten years there has been a drop in enrolments in our other disciplines, so the figures have been slowly falling from nearly 10% of our FE and HE student body to about 5% last year. I would suggest that there are several reasons for this decline including, but not necessarily limited to, competition with new and emerging programmes in the Republic of Ireland, differentials in fees, challenges with marketing of programmes in the recent pandemic years and, as has been alluded to in both the report and at last week's session, the misalignment of the UCAS and CAO systems. I should point out that those larger structural issues like the applications process would be addressed by our Department of Education in the North. We within DAERA and CAFRE would take our line from them.

I welcome the opportunity this afternoon to engage with the committee and to look at potential steps that could be taken to reduce any friction affecting cross-Border flows in both the

further and higher education sectors. Members should note though, as Heather Cousins raised last week, that any recommendations for policy change in Northern Ireland would be impacted by the current lack of an Executive and any policy decisions would be for an incoming Minister. I thank the joint committee for the opportunity to discuss its report and to share with Members the role CAFRE plays in the delivery of our programmes, both North and South.

Chairman: Our first member is Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh, followed by Senator Pauline O'Reilly, who is taking Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh's slot. Senator O'Reilly will be followed by Deputy Jim O'Callaghan.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: The witnesses are all very welcome. I thank them for the contributions they have made so far. I thank Professor McKenna for having outlined in his statement all the different pieces of work the Royal Irish Academy has done. That was very valuable, as were the other statements, in informing what we are trying to do here.

In his opening statement Professor McKenna points out that CORU does not extend the accreditation process to universities and other institutes in the North, meaning that students from the South who study and train must go through the complex and cumbersome accreditation process if they want to work in the South. It is important to note that students from the North face the same challenge if they want to work in the South. I suggest at this point that the committee write to CORU as an independent regulator and request that it extend the accreditation process to HEIs in the South. There may be specific reasons that cannot be done or delays or blocks in that regard, but this is a very serious matter, considering not only individual opportunities but also our labour force needs at the moment.

Could Professor McKenna walk us through why he believes the conversion of A-level to CAO points is such a barrier to cross-Border student enrolment from North to South and why the Royal Irish Academy recommends an annual review of the A-level conversion to CAO points? Does Professor McKenna believe there should be centrally co-ordinated outreach and information campaigns North and South, rather than leaving this solely to HEIs, which has not worked to date? I know there are valid reasons for that.

Another question I want to ask is about the decision-making procedure for the inclusion of further and higher education in the North-South Ministerial Council. What do the witnesses think are the potential blockages there and the challenges to having the further and higher education remit included within the North-South Ministerial Council?

I will just say to Mr. McKendry from CAFRE that it really fascinated me when I came across the equestrian school in Enniskillen and saw how it is managing to achieve almost a 50:50 split. I know he has referred to some of this in his statement, but why does Mr. McKendry believe that is the case? What lessons could what has been achieved there teach the wider higher education sector?

Those are my initial questions.

Professor Gerry McKenna: They are very significant questions.

I am not entirely sure what the problem is as regards equivalences between A-levels and the system in the South. The fact is that, traditionally, many students, particularly those in the comprehensive schools, would not have taken four A-levels but three. Perhaps some more imagination was required in dealing with those situations and the equivalencies. Perhaps a lack of urgency and a lack of concentration are the issue. This is so important. As I mentioned in

my introductory remarks, the fact is that the southern universities are pretty full with students. They are hardly looking for additional students in that sense. It is an issue that needs to be addressed, however. I know that Professor Pól Ó Dochartaigh of the University of Galway, for example, has been looking at this and wishes it to be developed further. It needs to be seen as an issue that is very important. That is why we say it should be done every year. In one sense, though, if it is done properly once it should be fine for a number of years. It is about wanting to ensure there is equivalence and fairness. As someone said, it is easier to get into medicine in Cambridge from Northern Ireland than it is to do a nursing programme in Galway, say. There is something not right with a system that does that. It needs to be seen as urgent and important. The Deputy mentioned the co-ordination of support. That needs to be developed at a higher level than just institutional support. As I say, it is not immediately apparent to me why an institution in the South would go out of its way, as some have, to recruit students from Northern Ireland. They do not need the students and are not short of them. Student flows in both directions is seen as desirable at a Government policy level. That should be in place.

Further and higher education is not included as a North-South Ministerial Council issue and it was not in the Good Friday Agreement at that time. There was a feeling at that time that perhaps it would work better if it was not overstated. I think the time has come. This is so important. It seems to be entirely relevant to be included in the North-South Ministerial Council as a very important part of what I would regard as non-controversial co-operation, North and South, to the benefit of both jurisdictions, however that is squared up. I would certainly suggest that should be seen as something important.

Mr. Martin McKendry: I thank Deputy Conway-Walsh for her kind comments on Enniskillen and our equine provision. Within the campus, we have about 200 equine students from level 2 FE right up to honours degree provision. It is a unique provision in these islands and has a clear focus on equine provision. We have invested considerably in the facilities and the people resource there. We are focused on and close to the equine industry, which is a global player. There is a strong equine sector in the South of Ireland. We have strong links through bursary and scholarship, leading to good jobs within the sector. The other part of it is that a number of people who have come from the South have had very successful careers and this means when other younger people talk to people in the industry, they become strong advocates for equine provision. There is momentum built around it. We have worked hard to have that footprint in the South. We attend many equine events. We know the industry and the key players in it fairly well. They invest considerably in the service provision. Therefore, we are at the stage where 40% to 50% of students come from the South.

On lessons, we are pretty unique because it is quite a defined sector and therefore lends itself to building long-term relationships, collaboration and partnerships. When that is tied with investment and career opportunities, there is a unique provision as a result. The lessons about job creation and job prospects have been clear. Our provision is very much industry-led. We have afforded opportunities to people to travel globally. I believe there is absolutely more potential within the equine sector to do more. If one talks to the industry, like in many sectors, there is a dearth of young talent coming in. That is an area that we intend to progress and develop further over the next year or two.

Dr. Anthony Soares: I will pick up on two points. The Deputy asked about possible blockages in including this as an area in the North-South Ministerial Council's remit. On that, I would make two points. Following the St. Andrews Agreement, a review of the areas of co-operation of the North-South Ministerial Council - we are approaching the 25th anniversary of the Good

Friday Agreement - to include higher and further education within the remit of the North-South Ministerial Council would be ideal timing. We are at that point. An obvious blockage at the moment is there is no Northern Ireland Executive to take its place at the North-South Ministerial Council and, therefore, it is not operating, but including it would show buy-in from the administration in Northern Ireland that it sees mobility in North-South student enrolment and collaboration and co-operation between the higher education and further education sectors North and South, that it is committed to it and that it shows that commitment also in terms of policy. As I referred to in my opening statement, the previous higher education strategy included, as one of its specific projects, project 11 precisely in terms of looking at increasing North-South student mobility. We do not have that anymore and we need that commitment back there again. However, it is a matter of getting that commitment from the administration in Northern Ireland because North-South co-operation needs the two poles. It cannot be just one pole because then it is not North-South co-operation. It has to have the two poles agreeing and committing to that.

With regard to the centralised outreach and information campaign, we have a flagship project within the Centre for Cross Border Studies, the Border People project, which helps people out with their cross-Border lives, including in the area of education. It was established as a project following a 2001 report by the North-South Ministerial Council joint secretariat looking into obstacles to cross-Border mobility. The Border People project came out of that. It includes information for people wishing to study in the other jurisdiction.

It is a confused picture. It needs resourcing. It needs some kind of focus and a strategic approach to give students, North and South, the correct information on the opportunities available to them in the other jurisdiction.

Chairman: I call Senator Pauline O'Reilly, who will be followed by Deputy Jim O'Callaghan.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: I thank the panel for their contributions.

First, I thank Dr. Soares and Professor McKenna for their long advocacy and work in the area of North-South co-operation when it comes to education. Indeed, I am interested in and will return to Mr. McKendry's programmes.

What has changed since last year is we have legislation and we have work starting in the area recognises the problems that they are identifying. What has been helpful, both from this week and from last week, is looking at the specifics of what will take us from a position where it is clear we have quite poor collaboration. They certainly identified some of those areas, for example, the blockages when it comes to the applications processes. Professor McKenna spoke about his work in trying to encourage the education system north of the Border to even give the information to students about what there is south of the Border. There are still some key areas that it is quite hard to see a path through, that is, the fullness of the institutions south of the Border and how we change that. I was interested in Dr. Soares's approach to programmes where we are looking not at a full-time mobility but a part-time mobility model. Is that something we could flesh out and have as a cornerstone, maybe to even get things started?

I am interested in the programme in Mr. McKendry's institution in that it very much linked to agriculture and food. I am interested to know to what extent is it aligning with Government policy. Policy might be very different, North and South. We have a climate action plan in place. We need to see that people are being educated in a way that aligns with the plan. How does Mr. McKendry see that progressing in the future in order for us to have this mobility of people working North and South when there are two different administrations and different policies? It

is something that we have to take into consideration south of the Border. That has an implication for a person going to work in a different jurisdiction. He or she needs to have the basics in that jurisdiction's policies, procedures and administration. Is that achievable? I think it is. I would be interested to know the circumstances of the witnesses and how it has been achieved to date.

Professor Gerry McKenna: I welcome those comments. I do not think there is a massive divergence in objectives, North and South, in terms of governance and what is intended, be it in higher education or policy issues generally in agriculture, climate change or whatever. There is probably a lack of co-ordination and discussion. We have to try to find ways of removing what I would call silly barriers to co-operation where people naturally end up in silos. This should change. I welcome hugely Deputy Conway-Walsh's suggestion about writing to CORU, for example, to remove what I am sure was an unintended consequence regarding regulation. It certainly was not intended by the Government here to prohibit people from studying in Northern Ireland and moving back and students from the North going South and so on. There is a real opportunity to start co-ordinating things, say that we are trying to do the same things and should not have these barriers in place, and remove them systematically and carefully.

Dr. Anthony Soares: I thank the Senator for her question. We need to know what is out there in terms of short-term mobility, that is, not the full enrolment and someone going and studying full time in other jurisdictions. We also need to take into account what is happening in terms of students, as part of their courses, spending part of the course as a sandwich course or even work placements in the other jurisdiction and with apprenticeships and vocational training. We need to look at and promote that. One of the easiest ways perhaps to increase North-South student mobility both ways is around postgraduates. Under the shared Ireland initiative, the North-South research programme has increased the collaboration and activity between institutions, North and South. We should invest in research programmes to include within it and the ability of postgraduate students to cross into the other jurisdiction.

We should look at the context in the two jurisdictions currently. We also have to think about the wider picture and what is happening now in the student populations, North and South. For 2021-22, 75% of postgraduate enrolments in southern institutions were from this jurisdiction. They are Republic of Ireland, ROI, domiciled. If we look at total postgraduate enrolment in the same year for Northern Ireland, 50% of postgraduate students in northern institutions were from Northern Ireland. There is a huge differential in terms of who postgraduate students in Northern Ireland are. Then one starts looking at where the other ones are coming from. This is not just Northern Ireland; this is UK-wide. There is an expansion in international students. They are now increasingly becoming part of that population at undergraduate and postgraduate level. We have to think about the matter in that wider context. It reflects on the funding models as well and how institutions are funded. Is it supportive and encouraging for North-South co-operation and mobility in this sector? We need to take that into account as well.

Mr. Martin McKendry: I thank the Senator for her comments. I will take it in two areas. It is a policy agenda within the department. It is strong around our new agricultural policy, our food strategy framework and our Climate Change Act now as well. That drives programme development and curriculum development from a CAFRE perspective, and that is linked in with the industry. For example, in regard to the new Climate Change Act, we launched a new honours degree around sustainable agriculture conferred by Ulster University. Our enrolments on that are phenomenally strong. They look strong for the next year or two as well. We have to continue to do that curriculum development. That also impacts on our industry-facing work,

which is the other half of the business. That is about being in a position to deliver the messages, and the K-T-innovation around developing a sustainable agricultural and agrifood model going forward. We continue to have to develop our curriculum in line with that.

I also want to pick up on the opportunities actually to work cross-Border on these areas within that K-T-innovation-education space. We have a good collaboration with Teagasc. In fact we have a senior Teagasc team coming up tomorrow for two days. There is real potential to develop that collaboration further in regard to the learning model around the new knowledge we are going to need within agrifood to meet our climate change targets over the next ten, 20 or 30 years. There is a real opportunity to enhance that part of it. There are also opportunities to enhance the student experience. It does not have to be, to pick up on Mr. Soares's comment around this, short term. It does not have to be all or nothing. There is a blended approach in terms of shared learning and shared experience for students particularly in the agrifood sector. That is an exciting sector over the next year or two, with a number of problems and issues to be solved.

Senator Pauline O'Reilly: It is not that I am saying one jurisdiction is better or worse than the other in regard to policy. I am wondering if there is an issue if the model is completely driven by one jurisdiction's policy when people are then going south into a different jurisdiction. We need that kind of thinking here, that if you are completely educated in one model, not to say it is not better or worse, then how are we ensuring that mobility after the education? That was my point, but I thank Mr. McKendry very much.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: I will start with a question for Mr. Soares. He mentioned in his opening statement that student mobility can happen as a result of bilateral initiatives. We see that around the world. Are there many bilateral initiatives in place between third level institutions in Northern Ireland and in Ireland, of which he is aware?

Dr. Anthony Soares: I thank Deputy O'Callaghan for the question. Not many, no. It is particular institutions that, for various reasons, developed a relationship normally beginning around research co-operation or, because of individual academics' links, then develop into something wider. It is not strategic. It happens in individual instances but it is something we should not ignore. We should look at why these happen and if they can be replicated elsewhere.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Has it occurred to Mr. Soares that they perhaps view themselves as competitors?

Dr. Anthony Soares: I want to be diplomatic here.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Please do not.

Dr. Anthony Soares: They are not necessarily competing. All institutions are striving for excellence. They are all autonomous institutions. They are all striving for excellence. Obviously they are looking at how they are doing relative to other institutions. However, they are also able to see where it is of mutual benefit to introduce it, they will co-operate. Universities Ireland is a classic example of that where the presidents and vice-chancellors of all the universities come together to discuss areas where it is of mutual benefit to the institutions, to their students and to the communities they serve to collaborate and co-operate. What I am trying to reflect is that for those institutions that further that collaboration, they need that certainty, that policy context behind them that gives them the encouragement that "Yes, we want you to do this" and "Yes we are going to provide the support for you to do that". That will give them the

context to further that collaboration.

A final point is that the example relating to climate change is a common challenge for the two jurisdictions, North and South. It is an issue on which they need to co-operate, including within the further and higher education sector. Doing so is of mutual benefit to both. At the Centre for Cross Border Studies, of which I am director, we are always trying to encourage people not to see cross-Border co-operation or North-South co-operation as a luxury or that extra thing you do. It is not something that should be left in the hands of a particular person just because he or she lives near the Border and is, therefore, put in charge of cross-Border co-operation and left to get on with it. It has to be something that is taken on and recognised as core to one's mission. It is core to the policies of the two jurisdictions but, in this instance, it just so happens that in order to further that core mission we are collaborating on a North-South basis. It should not be seen as a luxury or an appendage that can be done away with at times of crisis or when the economies are not doing as well as they might.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Professor McKenna is wearing two hats - he is a former professor at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy, RIA. Am I right in thinking the RIA is an all-Ireland entity? From his experience at Queen's-----

Professor Gerry McKenna: I was at the University of Ulster.

Deputy Jim O'Callaghan: Apologies, it was the University of Ulster. What is his assessment of bilateral arrangements between universities on the island? Has the RIA helped to ensure there is academic co-operation?

Professor Gerry McKenna: The Deputy is correct that the Royal Irish Academy is an all-island organisation. We do all we can to promote co-operation and collaboration. We have a North-South committee, for example, which deals with all sorts of issues relating to Brexit and linkages with Ireland and Great Britain through the Celtic Academies Alliance, the Seven Academies Group and so on. There is quite a lot of collaboration and co-operation between universities in Northern Ireland and their counterparts in the Republic. The example of which I am most aware is the Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance, which involved the University of Ulster along with Trinity College Dublin and University College Cork originally but now Queen's University and UCD. That has led to a joint masters programme, for example, which is part of a European initiative. There is a lot of funding of joint initiatives. Obviously, funding is required to promote initiatives. The shared island unit funding has been very helpful. The recent funding from the Higher Education Authority has promoted North-South co-operation. On the research side in particular, as Dr. Soares stated, there is a significant amount of activity. There is further scope. Developments have occurred at postgraduate level but we have not seen as much at undergraduate level. It is slightly more complicated. That said, we are aware of the movement within Europe to develop European degrees whereby, in effect, one could take different modules from different institutions and there would be equal recognition of those modules. Such a system ought to be in place in the context of the island of Ireland. There is goodwill to do that. In fact, all the institutions may have considered their statutes to ensure they could award joint programmes. The extent to which that has been taken up is perhaps not fully developed but it is important.

In addition, the RIA has been promoting substantial co-operative all-island initiatives in the humanities, for example. There is a lot more going on than people may realise but more could be done. There is certainly no barrier from the institutions to more co-operation and collaboration. In terms of competition, in some ways it is easier for a Southern university to co-operate

with a Northern university than with its neighbouring university in the Republic, and *vice versa*. It is a question of providing the impetus for that to happen. We mentioned that a cross-Border institution should be developed or, at least, considered in respect of the north west, for example. That looks to be the sensible thing to do, that is, not be bound by jurisdictional constraints. There is a lot more going on than people realise. The more that is nudged and supported the better.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: It is very encouraging that CAFRE can attract many students from the Republic of Ireland. Does Mr. McKendry think that is because it offers specific expertise as opposed to CAFRE doing something different from other institutions?

Mr. Martin McKendry: It is probably both. We have a very unique provision. From an equine perspective, we deliver the academic and the applied.

Deputy Jim O’Callaghan: Does any other institution on the island do that?

Mr. Martin McKendry: Kildalton College does a course at further education, FE, level and the University of Limerick has an honours provision but combining HE and applied in respect of horses is pretty unique, from our perspective.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: I welcome everyone. I will dig straight into it and pick up a point that was mentioned in response to Deputy O’Callaghan. The shared island unit was referenced. Will the witnesses spell out the benefits that have accrued from that unit, North and South, since it was established, if they can speak to that?

When I was a student, I did my BA degree in my home county of Cork, which was natural enough. I went on to do two postgraduate courses. Whether it was my fault or that of my institution, at that time, Northern Ireland was never considered or was never an option for me; neither was Dublin for that matter. As I said, it may have been down to ignorance, or lack of knowledge or information, but it was something I never considered.

Professor McKenna spoke about the present difficulty around accommodation, for example, in addition to fees, grants and the basic nuts and bolts. If a student from the South is looking at the North as an option, what will he or she expect as regards fees and grants? From the reverse perspective, what do students in the North think when they look at the South?

Professor Gerry McKenna: The shared island unit has been supportive of co-operation and collaboration in a reasonably gentle way. The substantial funding that came through the HEA for North-South research collaboration essentially came through the unit. That has led to a number of high-calibre projects, both large scale and some smaller scale, that cover the whole range of disciplines. That has promoted North-South co-operation and collaboration. Regrettably, the funding has not been matched by equivalent funding from Northern Ireland, partly because of financial constraints on the Northern Ireland budget. It is to be hoped that might change in future because it is important that both jurisdictions play into these things and put support towards them. In that sense, the shared island unit has been helpful.

The unit has also funded various initiatives that have promoted co-operation and collaboration. Speaking for the RIA, we now have a programme, funded by the shared island unit and the Irish Research Council, looking at the question of student mobility in respect of regions and place. We are particularly concerned about the issue of regions left behind and the extent to which they need to be kept in the picture. There is an area of economics now that deals with the revenge of the places that do not matter, which we have seen across the world. That also

applies in the context of Ireland. We do not want people to be forced to leave their regions to develop because, in many cases, particularly that of Northern Ireland and the north west, they tend not to come back. The shared island unit has been helpful and supportive of all those types of benign co-operation and collaboration that we can all support.

Accommodation is, of course, an issue. It has been solved, to some extent, in the northern situation because developers have moved in and provided a lot of accommodation. The fees issues is not that big a deterrent anymore, at least currently, between the South and the North. The fees differential between students studying in the South and North is not that great. On whether the cap on student numbers could be removed in Northern Ireland without substantially raising student fees, I am not sure what the answer is but it would be politically difficult. It is an important issue. I do not think there is any financial disincentive to students from the Republic studying in Northern Ireland. In terms of accommodation it would seem that the situation is better than it might be in the Republic.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: I will address the last question. The realignment of UCAS and the CAO was mentioned. Can the witnesses spell out what they envisage that would involve? Would it involve alignment, timing or a redrawing of the points system? I ask them to speak to that again.

Professor Gerry McKenna: We have spoken about the issue of equivalence between A-levels and the leaving certificate. Insofar as that has been done, it has been somewhat unfair in terms of A-level applicants. Students in Northern Ireland and the Republic who apply through UCAS get conditional offers earlier in the year. They are sitting with those offers and have a certain attachment to them. They then get their offers earlier than would be the case for universities in the South. That is an issue. It is a difference of approximately a fortnight, but it is quite an important fortnight in the life of an 18-year-old. There is an attachment to that. Something might be done to align that.

There seems to be a problem with being in UCAS and the CAO. Ulster University had a template to be in both, but there was a view that would not be possible from the point of view of UCAS. I would have thought that was a solvable problem. There is no reason the Northern universities could not be included in UCAS. That would be of some help in smoothing the application process for universities so they have a better view of what is happening in terms of potential numbers.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Some relevant suggestions have been made that will inform our work. We note the challenges with the new economy that will come on board. If Boris Johnson does not get his way, it is to be hoped we will have an economy soon.

I was on the new Ulster University campus on Friday. I want to thank Paul and Claire-Anne for their tour and discussions. It is fabulous. I have told everybody about what it has to offer.

What is different this time is that it is explicit in the legislation, which gives the context. There is now a context that has never been there before, in particular relating to student mobility. Great collaboration has been happening across the island, but it has not reached undergraduate level. That is what we are trying to get at here.

We should continue to encourage lifelong learning, but we need to improve the understanding of undergraduates across the island, which feeds into prosperity, peace, reconciliation and everything we are trying to achieve on the island as a whole. That is explicit in legislation. That

creates a responsibility around resource allocation to make sure it happens. The committee is clear about the role we have to play in that. As an Opposition spokesperson, I am clear about this.

In everything we have spoken about with the Minister, Deputy Harris, regarding having an all-Ireland approach, he has never said anything that has given me any reason to doubt what he has said. We will follow the money and where resources are being allocated, and that speaks volumes. The Minister has supported everything we are trying to do on this committee.

I want to ask Mr. McKendry about the veterinary school that has been proposed. We have major challenges with the lack of places here. There are 82 places confined to UCD, encompassing small and larger animals. There is a need for vets in rural areas. We need to ensure that accreditation works across the island so that the VCI and Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons accreditation is in place. Could the witnesses speak to how important that all-island accreditation is? Do the witnesses see any opportunities besides that, even for a joint approach? I raised it with the Minister last week and it seemed as though he would support a joint approach between one of the HEIs or colleges here and in the North. We spoke about that in respect of Ulster University and of Queen's. We have an opportunity here as well to show that we are intent on the all-island approach for veterinary studies.

Chairman: To add to that question, does Mr. McKendry know what numbers leave the island of Ireland to pursue veterinary studies abroad?

Mr. Martin McKendry: No. I have no idea on those numbers at all.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: We know that 70% of new vets were educated outside Ireland.

Chairman: It is a huge number. I know it is a priority for the Government but we have been raising this here.

Mr. Martin McKendry: I will answer as best I can. I am not actually involved in it. I know that our previous Minister commissioned a strategic investment board to carry out a review of the issue or need within a Northern Ireland context. That work and that report is being taken forward by the two universities, Queen's and Ulster, with the veterinary associations in Northern Ireland at the minute. I am unaware of its exact position at this stage. That work is going on between both universities and the associations. Other than that, I do not have a line of sight.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: Mr. McKendry will agree it is important to have all-island accreditation. I know where it is in terms of the economies of scale and the investment that it would take initially. If there was to be a shared investment between the North and South, it might make it easier and might support the business case in a better way than if either jurisdiction did it.

Chairman: Does Dr. Soares wish to come in?

Dr. Anthony Soares: Not on that specific matter, but on the general issue of mutual recognition of professional qualifications. Since the first quarter of 2021, the Centre for Cross Border Studies has been undertaking quarterly surveys of North-South and east-west co-operation in, specifically, civic society organisations and local authorities on the island of Ireland to monitor where they are in terms of their North-South and east-west relations and collaborations and to look at what issues are coming up for them. One issue is the mutual recognition of professional

qualifications, specifically on a North-South basis. We are talking here about North-South student enrolments. Students also need to have confidence that, if they are going to another jurisdiction to undertake something that leads to a professional qualification, on returning to their home jurisdiction they will be able to practice with that professional qualification. This is becoming an issue. The health sector is one sector where we are starting to see this coming up.

I want to point out and remind this committee that the protocol is on Ireland-Northern Ireland. It is not the Northern Ireland protocol. Article 11 of the protocol on Ireland-Northern Ireland sets out maintaining the necessary conditions for North-South co-operation. The European Union and the UK signed up to maintaining the necessary conditions for North-South co-operation. Unfortunately, I do not think they understood what the necessary conditions were. I think they have a very narrow vision of them. We need to ensure that they understand what the necessary conditions are, which includes mutual recognition of professional qualifications. It is not coming up with dual systems. It is maintaining mutual recognition of professional qualifications, which is not just in the hands of HEIs but is in the hands of professional bodies as well. We need to get them around the table and ensure that we have that mutual recognition of professional qualifications and we do not start to see obstacles arising in respect of that.

There are other issues coming up. Some of the HEIs are starting to encounter issues that people never thought of.

Unfortunately we did. We pointed out these issues would come up. The issues of cross-Border transfer of data and cross-Border insurance are coming up now. They all have to do with the fact that in current discussions around the protocol and its potential resolution, it is often forgotten that, because of the protocol, Northern Ireland is in the Single Market for goods but not for services and that has consequences, including for the further and higher education sector. This impacts on what students might do with regard to North-South student mobility.

Chairman: I thank all the witnesses for coming before the committee today and for their extremely beneficial views. I commend them on the work they do in their areas in North-South relations. Deputy Conway-Walsh has done a huge body of work on this issue and we will continue our deliberations. I thank her for that.

The joint committee adjourned at 1.21 p.m. until 11 a.m. on Tuesday, 28 February 2023.