

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM

FEIDHMIÚ CHOMHAONTÚ AOINE AN CHÉASTA

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT

Déardaoin, 19 Samhain 2020

Thursday, 19 November 2020

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 2 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 2 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
Jennifer Carroll MacNeill,	Frances Black,
Rose Conway-Walsh,	Niall Blaney,
Patrick Costello,	Emer Currie,
James Lawless,	John McGahon,
Pádraig Mac Lochlainn,	Niall Ó Donnghaile.
Brendan Smith.	

Teachta/Deputy Fergus O'Dowd sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

Cross-Border Further and Higher Education Sectors: Discussion

Chairman: On behalf of the committee, I welcome Mr. Paul Hannigan, president of Letterkenny Institute of Technology, and Professor Malachy Ó Néill, provost of the Magee campus of Ulster University.

The evidence of witnesses physically present or who give evidence from within the parliamentary precincts is protected pursuant to both the Constitution and statute by absolute privilege. However, witnesses and participants who are to give evidence from a location outside the parliamentary precincts are asked to note that they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness giving evidence from within the parliamentary precincts and may consider it appropriate to take legal advice on this matter.

Witnesses are also asked to note that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and should respect directions given by the Chair and the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the person's or entity's good name. I invite Mr. Hannigan and Professor Ó Néill to make their opening statements.

Mr. Paul Hannigan: The cross-Border further education and higher education cluster comprises Ulster University, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, North West Regional College and Donegal Education and Training Board. The North West Strategic Growth Partnership, NWSGP, led by Derry City and Strabane District Council and Donegal County Council, was instrumental in the launch of this partnership in February 2018. The NWSGP is a unique inter-jurisdictional structure endorsed by both Governments through the North-South Ministerial Council. The agreement is the result of years of successful collaborative working among the four education sector providers – Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Ulster University, North West Regional College and Donegal Education and Training Board – with the aim of improving access to higher and further level education and training to students living and studying in the north-west city region.

The north-west strategic growth plan identifies that for the north west to remain competitive and at the cutting edge, the education partners must increasingly collaborate and adopt a joined-up approach to attract students to their campuses. This formal strategic alliance among the four partners provides a conduit for a collaborative project that will harness the breadth of partners' programmes and facilitate development of shared services; boost the economy of the north-west region; strengthen the local skills base; and block the brain drain of students leaving the area for what they perceive are better opportunities elsewhere. The partners work together as "anchors" for the economy of the region exploiting the links between research, education, workforce development and economic competitiveness.

The project partners are committed to supporting activity that can enable delivery in a value-adding context of the following strategic outcomes that are cited in the Irish higher education strategy: better planning and organisation of programmes allowing for differentiated offerings; greater impact through pooling of effort and development of shared services; more explicit attention to student pathways and progression; and a co-ordinated approach to enterprise and other stakeholders at regional level. Additionally, the agreement supports work that can contribute to the following outcomes of the higher education strategy for Northern Ireland, facilitate cross-border student mobility, reduce the obstacles to student mobility between North

and South, pursue collaboration that is beneficial to the institutions involved and students and facilitate cross-Border co-operation in teaching and learning, particularly where it is geographically advantageous.

Funding of €250,000 from the Higher Education Authority, HEA, Landscape Call 2018 was announced in November 2018 to establish a functioning regional cluster, focus on programme mapping and student pathways, develop a regional further and higher education prospectus, identify opportunities for collaboration to better support the innovative industry in the north-west city region and examine opportunities to make the region more attractive to inward investment. The 2019 proposal to support smart industry in the north-west city region, Smart Industry NoW, received €500,000 from the HEA Landscape Call 2018 recognising that the north-west city region has transitioned over the past decade to become a hub for companies in the smart industry sector with a particular strength in fintech-ICT. This proposal concentrates on industry engagement, focusing on smart industry sector, delivering on the significant potential of the education partners and better supporting the innovative industry in the north-west city region.

This Smart Industry NoW proposal is in line with Future Jobs Ireland 2019: Preparing Now for Tomorrow's Economy and will give students and employees the skill sets that are in very high demand and offer access to exciting and rewarding careers. The partners collectively have the potential to deliver the key cutting edge skills identified in the report, namely, artificial intelligence, augmented and virtual reality, data analytics, the Internet of things and blockchain. Further projects from this alliance will aim to leverage the partners' ingenuity and flexibility in providing bespoke cutting-edge programmes for innovative industry in the region. Partners provide research informed education and training via the very significant and developing research assets in this region. These assets include the WiSAR Lab at LYIT, together with LYIT's INTERREG-funded cross-Border centres, the Centre for Advanced Manufacturing and the Centre for Personalised Medicine, both involving Ulster University, Bryden Centre Renewable Energy and Ulster University's key research strengths at its Magee campus, Cognitive Analytics Research Lab, CARL, Intelligent Systems Research Centre, ISRC and further enhanced through City Deal Innovation projects, Centre for Industrial Digitalisation, Robotics and Automation, CIDRA, and the Transformation for Healthcare Research, Innovation and Value-based Ecosystem, THRIVE.

LYIT's Strategic Plan 2019-2023 affirms that the institute is motivated to seek out collaboration partners that can add value, extend our reach or provide impetus to ongoing activity. The continuation of the cross-Border cluster engagement is strategically important to LYIT and key to our pursuit of technological university status through the Connacht-Ulster Alliance with our partners IT Sligo and GMIT. Our partners in the cluster share our understanding of the challenges that Brexit represents and this cluster offers opportunities for a better co-ordination of the further and higher education response to these challenges for the north-west cross-Border region.

Two years of funding via the HEA landscape fund has allowed for a deepening of relationships and provided a glimpse of the future potential of this collaboration. The initial focus was on the development of the cross-Border further and higher education prospectus to look at addressing impediments to progression for learners in the region. Funding in 2020 was aligned with the Irish Government's future jobs strategy to give students and employees the skill sets that are in very high demand and offer access to exciting and rewarding careers. By the end of 2020, the cluster will have a smart industry board in place, actively supporting the growth of employment in the north-west city region and will also deliver further collaboration on educa-

tion and training programmes including research studentships that will be jointly supervised by the higher education partners. In addition, the partners will promote the significant strengths in tertiary education in the region and the growing network of innovation centres and digital hubs through a new website and an annual conference.

In June 2019, the education partners presented their plan for 2020, Delivering Economic Growth through Regional Innovation Pathways and Networks at the NWSGP meeting at Dublin Castle. The coming years clearly offer many exciting opportunities for increased collaboration in tertiary education in the north-west city region, with the significant city deal projects for Derry and Strabane, the commitment from the Irish Government for greater support for cross-Border collaboration in higher education and research, via the New Decade, New Approach agreement, plans to develop the Ulster University Magee campus, including the delivery of the school of medicine due to open in August 2021 and the planned €20 million extension at LYIT.

The close proximity of Letterkenny and Derry, approximately 35 km apart, allows for innovative programme collaboration and the significant history of collaboration on INTERREG-funded research projects will be further leveraged to enhance research collaboration, including opportunities available via the recast Peace Plus programme. The student services and stakeholder engagement workstream offers great opportunities to capture good practice and there is significant learning to be gained from the strong focus on industry engagement in the north-west cross-Border region, with its significant strengths in international financial services and fintech, advanced manufacturing, renewable energy and medtech. In addition, the region is home to two large regional hospitals.

The initial memorandum of understanding, MoU, between the partners reflected the higher education strategies of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and regional development strategies on both sides of the Border. There has been significant ongoing alignment of this project with the changing national policy context and the changing operating environments for each of the partners. Much has changed since the MoU was signed in February 2018. At that point, the real implications of Brexit had not been fully grasped and the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement, including the Executive, the assembly and the North-South Ministerial Council were not operating as planned. The inclusion in the Programme for Government - Our Shared Future, of the establishment of a shared island unit recently launched by An Taoiseach is also very welcome in progressing the work of the cross-Border cluster. The future impact of Brexit on the north-west cross-Border region, the most connected cross-Border region on this island, has garnered significant national and international attention and has both shaped and given greater impetus to the activities of the cross-border further and higher education cluster.

Chairman: Would Professor Ó Neill like to make an opening statement?

Professor Malachy Ó Néill: It is a joint statement, so I concur with the entirety of Mr. Hanigan's contribution. We welcome this opportunity to engage with the committee and reflect on the existing collaboration and the value of that collaboration going forward as we embrace the challenges of Brexit, etc., in the very near future.

Chairman: This issue was raised originally by Senator Blaney so I will come him first.

Senator Niall Blaney: I thank the committee for taking this matter at short notice. I also thank the witnesses for making themselves available at such short notice. It is great to have both of them available to us to outline the respective collaborations of Donegal Education and Training Board, ETB, and LYIT under the auspices of the north-west region and to hear an out-

line of their work since 2018. It must be said that the work on which these educational centres are collaborating sets a blueprint for Governments both sides of the Border. It is a blueprint that other Departments could and should be looking at, particularly in the areas of health, policing and cross-Border infrastructure. There is a lot that the shared island unit can learn from this venture.

I thank Mr. Hannigan for his comprehensive opening statement. From the point of the shared island unit, how can it be useful in moving forward the goals of LYIT? Is there potential for funding under the city status? I know Magee University is in receipt of funding because of its Derry city regional status. Under the auspices of the north-west city region, is there scope there for extra funding? Both of our witnesses have done a lot of work in the past with organisations and companies in their respective regions. This may, perhaps, be more pertinent to LYIT and the work it does with companies such as Zeus and Pramerica and how it has adapted programmes to meet those company's needs. I am not as up to speed on the work of Ulster University but I know it does a lot of similar work. In regard to previous collaborations, has either college ever found itself unable to meet the needs of a company in its region and passed over that collaboration to the other college? If not, is this something either colleges intends to do? Is this on the radar? I again thank the witnesses for making themselves available at short notice.

Chairman: The next speaking slot is for Sinn Féin. I am conscious that Ms Gildernew, Mr. Maskey and Mr. Brady are present, along with Mr. Eastwood, whom I will call after Sinn Féin.

Ms Michelle Gildernew: Deputy Conway-Walsh is taking the lead in this slot. She will be followed by Deputy Mac Lochlainn.

Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh: I thank Ms Gildernew. I am delighted to welcome Mr. Hannigan and Professor Ó Néill to this meeting. I thank them for their contributions and for keeping us up to date. I welcome the physical presence of my colleague, Mr. John Finucane. This is the first meeting he has attended in Dublin since the commencement of the new term. What has been presented to us today and the ongoing work is important for two reasons, particularly the development in respect of the Magee campus and the commitments made by the Irish and British Governments in New Decade, New Approach in terms of the capital investment. I commend what has been done in respect of the medical school and I look forward to seeing that develop and evolve. We all agree that there is an absolute economic and social necessity for us to develop the Magee campus for Derry and Donegal but also because of the Connacht-Ulster alliance. As I am from County Mayo, I am excited by its potential because I look forward to students who attend the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, GMIT, campus in Mayo being able to do part of their modules in Mayo and part at the Magee campus. Collaboration is the way forward.

I thank Deputy Mac Lochlainn, who is from County Donegal, for allowing me, as a Mayo person, to contribute and I will leave him some time. My main question is for Professor Ó Néill and concerns capital investment in the Magee campus. Is the university working on a business case that will be presented to the Government? We welcome the shared island unit and the money that has been ring-fenced for its work. How do we make sure that happens and in a timely way?

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I welcome both witnesses here today. I acknowledge, as a Deputy who represents Donegal, the immense role played by both of them in being leaders of education in the region, and particularly leading on the cross-border dimension. I am delighted that both of them are here today to talk about the practice that they have developed. As has been

rightly said, this collaboration is a benchmark for Departments and certainly in the North-South dimension. I thank them for all that they do.

As both witnesses know, when one looks at the whole picture of the island of Ireland, one can clearly see that all of the universities are located in the cities of Belfast, Cork, Dublin, Galway and Limerick. Consequently, there is historic frustration and anger because a region with approximately half a million people does not have a dedicated university. I say that not to denigrate the fantastic education provided at the Magee campus in Derry and the Letterkenny Institute of Technology, LyIT. Thanks to the two witnesses and others, that frustration and anger is being undone, which is welcome. I ask them to lay out how that is being undone. Obviously with the Connacht-Ulster alliance, there will be one technological university for the region comprised of GMIT, Institute of Technology Sligo, IT Sligo, and LyIT.

With a cross-border partnership all the elements of a university are finally coming together. How can the witnesses assure us that the courses provided are complementary rather than competing? I ask them to please spell out in more detail how they co-operate. A medical school is on the way for the Magee campus. How can one ensure that these places of education will provide a full array of education that will attract all the investment and encourage all the matching job creation in the region? I seek assurance on how all that will work.

I have talked about the exciting plans by both educational institutions. Can the Irish Government do more to co-fund the Magee campus? Can Stormont and the British and Irish Governments jointly fund projects in both the Magee campus and Letterkenny? I seek feedback on how Stormont and the British and Irish Governments can improve their financial offering to these educational institutions.

Chairman: The witnesses can answer all of the questions, including those of Senator Blaney.

Mr. Paul Hannigan: I thank members for their very positive comments.

In response to Senator Blaney's comments specifically around the shared island unit, it is a real opportunity for us in this context. We have had some preliminary discussions with the people who manage the shared island unit to establish where they are coming from and what they are trying to do. We are very conscious that the Higher Education Authority's funding streams I mentioned in my introductory piece have disappeared because funding is now being put directly into the technological university sector, rather than looking at landscape funding that allowed us to get funding to support the cluster up to date. The shared island unit is a real opportunity to consider what can be developed or supported across the two institutions and they are open to that. The majority of the funding from the shared island unit initially probably will be through major infrastructural projects, some of which probably will go to infrastructural projects on both campuses. At the same time, we envisage that soft supports will be put in place to continue the work we have started in this space. We are very excited by that in terms of the shared island unit and how we can move forward with that over the next while. We have started those conversations already.

In the context of the city deal and inclusive future funding that is going into Derry, the two councils in the region, namely, Donegal County Council, and Derry City and Strabane District Council, have worked very hard to balance the funding on my side of the Border to ensure there is equivalent funding to support Donegal in the context of the development of Derry in the context of the north-west city region, which must continue. We have all contributed to the arguments in favour before both councils and will continue to do so. I give great credit to both

councils for the work they have done because they have opened the field for us and gave us an opportunity to get into and move forward in this space, with political support, which is really important to us.

In the context of local employment, Professor Ó Néill can talk broadly about the situation on the other side of the Border. In terms of the foreign direct investment in the Letterkenny space, specifically from IDA Ireland, between 4,500 and 5,000 people are employed in that specific area whether it is in fintech or whatever. We believe that approximately 60% of the people employed in those institutions came from Letterkenny Institute of Technology in one form or another. While we have graduates going into those programmes, we are also doing significant upskilling for existing staff and in addition, senior management have completed masters programmes etc. with us. That relationship is really strong and we want to continue to build on that for the further development of the region.

I welcome the comments made by Deputy Conway-Walsh about the Connacht-Ulster alliance, CUA. I know that she is very interested in the Mayo campus and has recently discussed this matter with Dr. Orla Flynn in GMIT. The development of a technological university, for which we hope to make an application in the next month or so, will be a really important development from our perspective on the west coast.

Looking from our specific location in Letterkenny, while engaging with the Connacht-Ulster alliance on the development of the technological university concept, we were always conscious that we could not turn our back on Northern Ireland. That is why we have been actively involved in this cross-border cluster and we envisage that continuing as the technological university evolves. At that stage, there will probably be even closer contact between the various different bodies. Professor Ó Néill can deal with the specific questions about capital development at the Magee campus.

In terms of the questions asked by Deputy Mac Lochlainn, what is expected from us has been well laid out. In terms of complementary programmes rather than competing programmes, we are already in that space. At the launch of this cluster, we were able to profile a young man who started off at the North West Regional College, moved to Letterkenny Institute of Technology to study another programme and is completing a PhD study with us. He had been to the University of Ulster for some element of his programme and I think he went to school in Donegal in the education and training board, ETB, system. Therefore, he has availed of four institutions and hit every note. We saw the potential of people using all of the network within the north west to improve their own educational profile and journey as a result.

I have mentioned funding in the context of trying to strike a balance in funding on both sides of the Border. The cross-border cluster is unique and innovative because it is one of the first times that the Higher Education Authority gave funding to a cross-border project where it could be used on both sides of the Border. From my perspective, that was a strong endorsement by the Higher Education Authority in the Republic of Ireland that we could be part of the cross-border cluster and part of the technological university because the HEA funded both of them at the same time. That was a real strong endorsement of the strategy that we have followed in Letterkenny and one that will follow through strongly into the future. Perhaps Professor Ó Néill wants to take up a few specific issues.

Professor Malachy Ó Néill: I thank members for a range of queries. I will begin with Senator Blaney's point on what we have done to date in collaboration and what kind of impact that has had. Mr. Hannigan has already spoken of the student journey where a student, perhaps,

initiates that educational pathway in post-primary school in County Donegal. In various junctures on that journey, he or she might experience the provision at North West Regional College for a pre-degree qualification or perhaps a foundation degree at Letterkenny Institute of Technology, in collaboration with a top-up opportunity with us, after which he or she may have an opportunity for postgraduate study or pre-PhD studies with Ulster University Magee Campus or LYIT. That is a path well-trodden by many members of the population in the north west but it is one we will seek to expedite by making the transition from one institution to another much easier and plain sailing. That has been the thrust of much of the work we have done since the memorandum of understanding was signed in 2018.

Mr. Hannigan mentioned that we have been supported by the Higher Education Authority through funding and we have been able to use that funding in both jurisdictions. That has enabled us to carry out significant consultancy to create research posts which will better inform our practices in future. We are in the middle of a trawl to appoint what we have called a trans-jurisdictional operation officer or, essentially, someone who will look at those specific pathways from Donegal ETB into North West Regional College, LYIT, or Ulster University Magee Campus in any order one may wish to look at. The main ethos of this is the widening of access and participation in further and higher education and to make sure we can upscale our population of the north west in every way possible.

In terms of our collaboration with LYIT, one example I will give is the epicentre initiative established in 2008. It was between North West Regional College, Ulster University Magee Campus with our intelligent systems research centre, and colleagues in LYIT in support of electronics engineering, and working with companies and industry in the north west in that regard. The project led to two of the major city deal innovation projects referred to in our joint statement, one being CIDRA, which is the Centre for Industrial Digitalisation, Robotics and Automation. That is essentially industry 4.0, in other words, all things robotic and futuristic. It is about the future of work and how we upskill our population to be able to maximise the opportunities therein. The other is the CARL initiative, which is cognitive analytics or data analytics. That is of significant interest to Mr. Hannigan and colleagues in LYIT.

We supported LYIT in upskilling its members of staff through PhD opportunities, but also in shared research initiatives to put both of our institutions in the best possible position to cope with and maximise the opportunities in the data science space going forward. As a result, we have been able to develop expertise and that has been able to spread into other disciplines. For example, Mr. Hannigan mentioned the work we have been able to develop with the clinical and translational research centre, CTRC, in the past ten years in developing a world-leading hub in personalised medicine. Even in the recent pandemic, individuals such as Professor Tony Bjourson have led the way in tackling the pandemic. Ulster University researchers based at CTRC have been in receipt of significant research funding in recent times from Science Foundation Ireland, which is another example of the kind of cross-Border research collaboration we are driving forward. Dr. Magda Bucholc has also been co-ordinating the track and trace data-driven approach to tracking the pandemic right across an island-wide basis.

In that collaborative spirit, we have been able to develop world-leading centres of excellence in data science and personalised medicine which have put us in a much better position to develop a kind of ecology which will make a success of our school of medicine. Again, thanks to the efforts and support of many people in this virtual space, we are in a position to be able to open the doors of our school of medicine in August 2021. We have had the initial graduate medical school admissions test, GAMSAT, assessment series which, even in these difficult

times, we have been able to run from our Magee campus. Obviously, levels of interest are exceedingly high and we look forward to welcoming that first cohort in 2021.

The development of the medical school has been referred to as a game-changer and as totemic in many circles and it is. It has been mentioned that it is the north-west corner of the island. When we put forward the case for the school of medicine, we were known to say that if one was to draw a line on the map from Galway to Belfast, one would not find a medical school on one side of it but would find seven on the other. The addition of our new school of medicine in 2021 will change all that. It will not only put in place the opportunity to train as doctors and physicians in the north west, but all the kinds of supportive research and spin-off opportunities for local businesses and local researchers in that regard. That is why the research wing of the school of medicine, which has become known as THRIVE and is another of the city deal innovation projects, is pivotal and such a huge opportunity for the city and region.

In that collaborative spirit, we have been able to develop world leading standards of excellence in data science and personalised medicine that have put us in a much better position to develop a kind of ecology that will make a success of our school of medicine. Again, thanks to the efforts and the support of many people in this virtual space we are now in a position to be able to open the doors of our school of medicine in August 2021. We have had the initial Graduate Medical School Admissions Test, GAMSAT, assessment series which even in these difficult times we have been able to run from our Magee campus and, obviously, levels of interest are exceedingly high and we look forward to welcoming that first cohort in 2021. That medical school development has been referred to as a game-changer and totemic, etc. in many circles, but it is. It has been mentioned that it is the north west corner of the island. When we were putting forward the case for the school of medicine, we were known to say that if one was to draw a line on a map from County Galway to County Belfast, one would not find a medical school on one side of it but would find seven on the other. The addition of our new school of medicine in 2021 will change all that. It will also put in place not only the opportunity to train as doctors and physicians in the north west but also the kind of supportive research and the spin-off opportunities for local businesses and local researchers as well in that regard. That is why the research wing of the school of medicine, which has become known as THRIVE and is another of the City Lead Innovation projects, is so pivotal and is such a huge opportunity for the city and region.

To respond to Deputy Conway-Walsh's comments, she will be delighted to learn, particularly given her County Mayo origins, that this collaboration is not solely between Ulster University Magee Campus and LYIT. We also work with partners, including in Institute of Technology Sligo, particularly in the life and health space. In terms of the school of medicine, one of our key partners is the National University of Ireland Galway, NUIG. I chair the collaboration group involving Ulster University Magee Campus and NUIG, which collaborates on educational and research areas for the two medical schools.

It is important to note Deputy Mac Lochlainn's point on what is changing in terms of the Magee campus offering. This is a period of transformation for Ulster University but also for Magee campus specifically. It is not just through the city deal innovation project, although city deal is a huge part of that. It is the deliverance of those four projects, the school of medicine, THRIVE, the health research institute alongside the data science hub, which is CARL, and CIDRA in the areas of automation and robotics. They are four initiatives we have been able to develop and are now in the process of delivering. They met with the criteria of city deal and the inclusive future fund.

That is not to say we did not have other projects. For example, my own discipline and background is in arts, humanities and social science, and our Ulster University business school, which is a highly energised department based at Magee campus and probably one of our strongest in terms of collaboration with LYIT and North West Regional College. There are also projects in both of those areas that we seek to develop.

A nod has been given already by Mr. Hannigan to the conversations with the shared island unit. There is an opportunity for transformational projects therein. We welcome the support for Ulster University that was documented in the New Decade, New Approach document, but also the follow-up in governmental terms and by initiating those discussions in which we are now engaged.

Chairman: I call Mr. Eastwood who will be followed by speakers from the Fine Gael Party and Independent members.

Mr. Colm Eastwood: I thank the Chairman. I particularly thank Mr. Hannigan and Professor Ó Néill. I know the real commitment both men have to expanding university provision in County Derry. The medical school is welcome. Professor Ó Néill, in particular, will know the long hours that were put into finally getting that across the line and it is good that we are there. CIDRA, CARL, THRIVE and all the initiatives around the city deal innovation projects are important and welcome. It is great that the shared island unit and the programme for Government in Dublin have a real commitment to university provision in the north west. However, we have to be honest as well. Derry and Inishowen in particular have been absolutely starved of investment in higher education. It is a scandal that the decision was made in 1965, which we all know about, and it has not really been rectified yet. It is disappointing that we have more commitment from the Dublin Government than from the Stormont Government. The many promises over many years to the people of Derry in particular about having a full-scale operational university based in Derry have not been delivered, and that is the reality. This has had a huge impact in terms of our ability to create employment and create an economy in the north west of Ireland. Whether it is the lack of infrastructure or the lack of university provision, it has absolutely disadvantaged the people of Derry and Donegal and it needs to be rectified.

While all of this is very good and I want to congratulate Mr. Hannigan and Professor Ó Néill for working together and doing all the things they are doing, I suggest we need to be much more ambitious about what the north west needs. There needs to be a full-scale university in Derry. We need to stop hundreds of young people leaving the city every year and never coming back. Emigration is still a real problem where I come from and it needs to be resolved. While it is very good and we need to keep pushing the Government in Dublin, we need a real commitment from the Government in Stormont to deliver upon the promises it has made.

There are lots of commitments in “New Decade, New Approach” and we will see if we get it delivered. I, for one, will not be quiet about this until we get a full-scale university in Derry. My preference is that this would happen on a cross-Border basis. There is a major opportunity to deliver for the people of Derry, Donegal, Tyrone and the whole north-west region. However, we have to be very ambitious. Piecemeal development will not be enough to rectify the problem. I do not think people should expect anything less. I thank both the witnesses for the work they are doing. I caution that we need to go big on this or it will not have the transformational impact that we need.

Senator Emer Currie: It is good to meet Professor Ó Néill and Mr. Hannigan. I want to echo what speakers have already said about recognising the spirit of co-operation between

Letterkenny IT and Magee campus, which is very important, and about the shared island unit commitments, “New Decade, New Approach” and the medical school. Many of the questions I want to ask have already been touched on.

What is the status of the technological university application? Do the witnesses think it will be ready by the end of the year? Perhaps we could have an update on progress. In regard to the expansion of Magee campus to 10,000 students, are there timelines or is there a strategic plan around that?

With regard to the medical school, the additional medical student courses and the GPs that are so badly needed, is any integration planned between Altnagelvin and Letterkenny hospitals and how would that work? I am delighted to hear the medical school will be opening in August 2021.

I want to echo what Mr. Eastwood said about having a full-scale university in Derry. For me, that goes back to the 1960s and the campaign from John Hume and Eddie McAteer. I would like to hear the witnesses’ thoughts on that and on how it sits within all of this.

With regard to incubation hubs, the technological university in Blanchardstown has an incubator. This is fantastic in supporting start-ups, which is very good for the development of SMEs in Dublin West. Where is the potential for that in the north west? How is remote learning going? Will these institutions be integrating this into their teaching in terms of employment going forward, given many jobs will be done remotely in the future? Where does the university align with that?

Senator John McGahon: It is hard not to get jealous, given I come from Dundalk, when we look at how well Letterkenny and Derry are doing with this type of co-operation. Perhaps DKIT and Dundalk, which is the largest Border town, missed out on a real opportunity to try to get some sort of collaboration, such as is being done here. From a personal perspective, I look at it like that.

The witnesses mentioned a strategic plan. When this does get up and running, how would they try to sell it to students in the Republic of Ireland and the UK? What are the key ways of trying to get the message across and of saying, “This is where you should come for your third level education”? How would they encourage students to come to this part of the island?

Mr. Paul Hannigan: I should declare an interest in that I was in DKIT for ten years before I moved back to Letterkenny in the late 1990s, so I have a great affinity with that institution and I hope it progresses well. I really enjoyed my time in Dundalk.

To come back to the specific issues raised, the points made by Mr. Eastwood are valid in terms of going big and making sure we have ambition around this. Mr. Eastwood was involved in the first meeting of the Derry City and Strabane District Council, and he actually chaired the Derry council group in its infancy and saw things developing from there. I know he has been a very strong supporter of the university in Derry and very supportive of us in Donegal as well. We continue to move in that direction in terms of being ambitious for the region and making sure we are not disadvantaged in that space.

Senator Currie’s comments are very interesting. Coming from the Blanchardstown area, she knows the impact of having a technological university, given there is a campus of Technological University Dublin there. From our perspective in the Connacht-Ulster Alliance, we will be making an application for technological university status. We are completing the submission

documents as we speak, and we are in discussions with staff associations and finalising negotiations with them around various different aspects. It is likely we will have the submission document completed before Christmas, with the negotiations with the staff associations, hopefully, completed at the same time, and with a submission ready to go in probably towards the end of January. That is the sort of target we are working towards at the moment. A huge amount of work has been done to develop that.

In the context of the incubation units, there is a very interesting story to be told in the north west city region. We have a centre on campus called CoLab, which has around 60 small companies working in it at the moment, employing over 200 people. The latest extension of that was an INTERREG project with what was the Northern Ireland Science Park at the time, and is now Catalyst Inc. There is an equivalent facility in Derry city, which came from INTERREG funding and which is a sister facility to the one on Letterkenny IT campus, and the Ulster university is very involved with Catalyst Inc. as well. The area around that whole incubation space has been really important for us and we see the benefits of it as we move forward.

As we see developments on both sides of the Border, the synergies will only develop even further between the emerging technological university, the Ulster university and the other partners in the further education space. I have addressed some of the questions and I will leave the issues around the hospitals to Professor Ó Néill.

Professor Malachy Ó Néill: I will deal with the innovation hubs in the first instance. If we look at the City Deal projects that I mentioned earlier, the health research institute, a cognitive analytics research lab and a centre for industrialisation and digitisation of robotics and automation, there is huge potential for spin-offs and for graduate employment. There is also the retention of talent, in particular the retention of graduate talent.

If we think about the geography of our Strand Road location, with which Mr. Eastwood in particular will be familiar, and our proximity to the North West Regional College, we essentially occupy a shared site and a transition point between FE-HE, or further education and higher education. The North West Regional College, like Donegal ETB, plays a really important part in this four-piece partnership. Regarding the education partnership on that Strand Road site aligned to the innovations base, Mr. Hannigan alluded to Catalyst Inc., in particular. Catalyst is based at Fort George in Derry, which will in time become the location of a major healthcare and medical facility through the development of a Western Health and Social Care Trust facility. That will, in turn, provide significant opportunities for our community medics and trainee healthcare professionals. At the moment, our largest student cohort in Magee is in nursing. Our specialism in nursing is renowned worldwide for consistent outstanding performance in UK and world research terms. It is consistently in the top five or six in UK research and in the 30s in terms of world-leading research in that nursing space.

From 2021, not only will we introduce medical training, but also the first course of its kind in paramedic training. In terms of additional student numbers, healthcare is a huge focus for us and will remain so. By developing that healthcare education piece and supporting it through healthcare research, the capacity for spin-off opportunities is endless in that space.

The question of remote learning came up. Blended learning is something that Ulster University and LYIT have prided themselves on and pioneered development on in the past couple of decades. In reality, we have been engaging in blended or remote learning for some time but the pandemic has forced us all into a gear change in how we participate in and attend to various responsibilities. I am guessing this is the first time somebody has joined a meeting of the com-

mittee from Arboe, County Tyrone, and I am delighted to have that honour.

This is a changed world but a world of opportunity and we are incredibly well-placed, speaking in Ulster University-Magee campus terms, in that we have strong representation across all four faculties and each of those faculties is in that period of transition, transformation and development. It is by working with colleagues in LYIT and other partners that we are doing that successfully. Life and health will be transformed in Magee and in Derry through the initiation of the school of medicine and the health research institute. Aligned to that are the paramedic training, the nursing and the successes therein.

I have mentioned the Ulster University business school. We have an existing 15-year shared programme with LYIT in preparation for working in the public sector. We are well down the discussion pathway towards introducing a new programme of cross-Border accountancy, taxation and dealing with challenges around export and excise, particularly in the face of Brexit. That shared approach to business education and business research is well-established at this point.

The cognitive analytics and robotics development will make the north west a powerhouse in research terms and in research-led education in that industry 4.0 space. As a former UK city of culture, the 1,500-year anniversary of the birth of Colmcille gives us a huge opportunity to celebrate the arts, humanities and social science offering at Magee and to further develop our partnership with the Hume foundation, celebrate the success of the Hume and O'Neill Chair in Peace and develop the presence of research and education in that space. That is not to mention my own space, Irish studies. We are well-positioned to develop across myriad academic offerings and will continue to do so with our friends and colleagues in LYIT and our other north-west partners.

Senator Frances Black: I thank the witnesses for their clear presentations. This is something I am not really familiar with. The role they play in cross-Border co-operation and education is phenomenal and I admire them for that.

I hope this is not a naive question. Do they think Brexit will negatively impact cross-Border collaboration in third-level education? Second, what are the main obstacles to student mobility between North and South? If there are obstacles, how can they be addressed?

Mr. Paul Hannigan: I thank the Senator. I appreciate that question and it is an important one in the context of Brexit. Nobody is in favour of Brexit but the one advantage from our perspective, as I have been saying for a while, is that it brought the political focus back on the cross-Border area. That had disappeared from the political agenda for a time. The fact that Brexit arrived meant that, all of a sudden, there was a strong focus on cross-Border issues and what we were trying to do on a cross-Border basis.

In setting up this cluster, we were conscious of mitigating Brexit, particularly with regard to student mobility. There are no physical obstacles to students moving between North and South and we have, maybe, 120 students from Northern Ireland studying in Letterkenny. However, one would think we should have far more. Similarly, there are big numbers from Donegal studying in Magee and Dundalk has similar movement of students. It is more a traditional thing than anything else. The movement has not been to the Republic of Ireland as much as it possibly should have been and it has mostly taken well-worn paths to Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin in the first instance. It is only starting to trickle through and develop further into the institutes of technology in the past while. There are no physical barriers but

there are barriers around the development of the clusters, in terms of breaking down people's perceptions, working together and developing relationships.

Professor Malachy Ó Néill: I will build on Mr. Hannigan's comments, particularly in terms of Brexit. I authored a piece on *educationmatters.ie* in recent weeks titled "Bridging Brexit". I sought to look at the opportunities that might present themselves in a post-Brexit scenario. There is a saying in Irish, "múineann gá seift", which is essentially, "necessity is the mother of invention". The reality is that we have put in place a strong alliance and a positive partnership that might be looked upon as an antidote to some of the challenges around Brexit. That shared approach and strategy and working collaboratively puts us in a good place in the north west to develop that.

One of the practical challenges that sometimes goes unnoticed is across the island we facilitate a different system of transition from post-primary to tertiary education. For example, the UK UCAS system, which is the most common route into Ulster University, does not facilitate applications to Dublin, Galway or Letterkenny educational institutions. In the same way, the CAO system, which is the most commonly used mechanism to make the transition to college in the southern system, does not facilitate courses at Ulster university or Queen's University Belfast, for example. It is strange that a student in Buncrana is unable to apply for a course at Ulster university's Magee campus, some three, four or five miles down the road, through the system most commonly used in her school. Perhaps, therefore, there is an opportunity to explore a new approach. If courses in Ulster university, particularly Magee campus, could be offered through the CAO system, it could be an additional way of expediting the transition to third level and retaining talent in the north-west region.

Deputy Patrick Costello: I apologise for being late. I may have missed some of the presentations and questions so I apologise if I am repeating anything.

As with Senator Black, I was not very familiar with this area before now. I have a couple of questions. I want to pick up on the last point, on UCAS and the CAO. What would need to change for there to be a shift? Is it a matter for the Department of Education? Is it a job of work in the institutions? Is it a bit of both? What would need to change or move to open it up?

While I acknowledge we are talking about third level, I wish to refer to adult education and people who might not have finished school coming back to education. Will this sector be as impacted by Brexit as the sector the delegates have been talking about? Not everybody will be studying medicine or robotics. I had medicine very high on my list after my leaving certificate examinations but no one calls me "Doctor"; let us put it that way. I am interested in hearing a little about further education.

Professor Malachy Ó Néill: The UCAS-CAO conversation relates to the admissions process so it is one to be had with the agencies themselves. It would certainly be worth exploring. It would be beneficial to a number of partners, particularly in the cross-Border space.

That not everybody is going to pursue a career in medicine or robotics is why the broad offering is so important. It is important to acknowledge that we currently have strong offerings, from law to business, from the Irish language and drama to engineering and computing, and from nursing to social work and so on. We are adding paramedical and medical training from next year.

On making sure there is a fit for all and an opportunity to widen access to and participation

in further and higher education, the partnership plays an integral and pivotal role. Offering a transition from one institution to another is central to that. The statistics on widening participation show the kind of impact it makes, particularly at Ulster university's Magee campus. The most recent statistics show that 54% of students at Magee campus originate in the two lowest quantiles in terms of socioeconomic deprivation. That shows that education is making a huge difference in the north-west city region. It shows that Ulster university is making a huge difference in that city region and will continue to do so in collaboration with our partners, including North West Regional College, Donegal ETB and LYIT.

Mr. Paul Hannigan: To support that, and in answer to the question on further education, we deliberately set up the cluster to include the further education providers, Donegal ETB and the North West Regional College to ensure there would be opportunities for everybody in the region and that we could develop the progression routes we spoke about. That is a very important part of what we do.

To echo Professor Ó Néill's point on the socioeconomic profile, between 65% and 75% of the students at LYIT are in receipt of SUSI grants. We know what we are doing in the context of providing opportunities and giving students a chance to take one step up and work locally, if they wish, in the industrial base we are supporting, while also encouraging them to travel and engage elsewhere in the hope they will return at some stage. In Donegal, they tend to. It is just a matter of trying to develop this and engendering the spirit I describe in students as they graduate from the colleges.

Deputy Brendan Smith: I am delighted our colleague, Senator Blaney, suggested the witnesses make this presentation. In his introductory remarks, he outlined the importance of LYIT and Derry to the wider north west. During the last Dáil term, the committee members visited Magee campus and LYIT. It was very enlightening. It demonstrated to us very clearly the importance of both Magee campus and LYIT to the broader economy. It was very much underpinned by the North West Strategic Growth Partnership, whereby the local authorities worked very much together. At the time of our visit, we met Mr. Seamus Neely, the then Donegal county manager, and his counterparts from Derry. It was clear that not only did they have a memorandum of understanding but that they were also implementing programmes together, which was important. We can have strategies and plans but if there is no implementation we are going nowhere. It was the opposite in the region in question; things were happening through collaboration. There was a great synergy involving the local authorities, and similarly between LYIT and the Magee campus. That is very heartening.

I am delighted that Mr. Hannigan mentioned that further education is very much an aspect of the partnership. As we know, the regional colleges were established to lead in the necessary economic development of the regions. The further education colleges were then developed to meet the needs of the local economy and growing areas with the potential to create jobs. It is important that the further education element be maintained.

Are the industrial promotion agencies, both north and south of the Border, an integral part of the delegates' work and thinking, in addition to the background work they do in preparing programmes?

The education architecture is set out regarding Connacht–Ulster through the proposed Connacht–Ulster alliance and the technological university involving GMTI, Sligo IT at LYIT. Mr. Hannigan told us the application would be submitted in January. When are decisions expected regarding the success, or otherwise, of such technological university applications? When the

alliance is put in place, there will be new demands and challenges. I am very anxious that we do not sidetrack the impetus that has existed between Letterkenny and Derry and that we emphasise consolidating the new educational architecture between GMIT, Sligo IT and LYIT. I hope that the parallel consolidation and further development of the important Letterkenny–Derry framework will be continued. It is essential. We all warmly welcome the shared island initiative of the Government.

As we know, education and health are two of the sectors identified in the Good Friday Agreement for development on an all-Ireland basis. What the witnesses have been doing is putting into practice what is reflected in the overall thinking behind the Good Friday Agreement. Now there is an opportunity to build on that, with specific funding, additional funding, provided through the shared island initiative. Deputy Mac Lochlainn mentioned that we do not want universities and institutes of technology competing for students. It is essential to the further development of new programmes in colleges that they be complementary and not compete with those of their neighbours, north or south.

I had the opportunity in Letterkenny and Derry to see at first hand the important ongoing work and the determination of both sides to make it succeed. I wish the delegates well in their continued work.

Deputy James Lawless: I thank our guests for their presentation. I missed the actual presentation but I did get a chance to read it in advance. It is great to have the witnesses at this committee. I am interested in higher education and in research in particular, which I did some work on as my party's spokesperson in the last Dáil. Brexit poses many challenges in the educational space north of the Border and in the UK. European Research Council, ERC, funding and Horizon 2020 funding including FP9 funding is available within the EU but may not be available following Brexit. That is a challenge for our witnesses and for other institutions across the Border. Science Foundation Ireland, SFI, had some ideas to address this, as did the Irish Research Council. The RIA is an all-island body established in 1735 and the Institute of Physics is an Ireland and UK body. These are quite august institutions that predate independence and hence are organised on an all-island and wider basis and maybe there opportunities there. One of the proposals that came through was that one way for universities in the North and the UK to continue to access ERC-type funding would be to have joint-chairs. A proposal could be put together, for example, by the University of Ulster and a university south of the Border for a joint research fellowship, professorship, initiative or team. That would also combat the risk of a flight of intellectual capital whereby research activity, research teams or research team leaders would move to other EU jurisdictions in order to access European funding. It seems like a good idea and eminently practical on an all-island basis. It would probably be a lot easier to run a joint chair between Belfast and Dublin than between Manchester and Dublin or London and Cork, for example. Has that been progressed in any meaningful sense? Is that something in which any of our witnesses is involved? Is it something that might become a reality next year? Is it something with which we could assist or is it even in the ether?

Mr. Paul Hannigan: I thank Deputy Smith for his contribution. I remember when he visited and he got a good feel for what is happening up here. In response to the question on the State agencies, both IDA and Enterprise Ireland reside in our co-lab facility as I mentioned earlier. We have very close contact with both organisations in terms of their engagement. In terms of developing new courses and opportunities around research, real benefit comes from engagement with companies themselves. We have really strong relationships with many of the FDI and Enterprise Ireland client companies that have been set up in terms identifying their needs

and how we can meet them proactively in order to continue skills-based development within the region and to anchor those companies here. In Letterkenny alone there are approximately 4,500 people in FDI employment and 60% of them are graduates from here. We are also involved with Enterprise Ireland companies in Killybegs specifically looking at the development of the marine. There are real opportunities there.

In terms of the development of the technological universities, Deputy Smith asked about the timescale. It is our ambition to submit the application by the end of this year or the beginning of next year and that, having gone through all of the stages, the technological university will be set up by 1 January 2022. That is the target we have set for ourselves. We feel that we can achieve that and that is what we are working towards. We will obviously continue the ongoing collaboration with the University of Ulster. As I said earlier, the fact that the HEA is willing to fund both initiatives out of the same pot of money for a period of time is a recognition of the importance of both and the necessity to keep both of them going. That will continue.

I will ask Professor Ó Néill to address the research question but I would just say that a meeting is being co-ordinated by SFI in the next couple of weeks specifically to look at North-South collaboration. There has been some work done in that space.

Professor Malachy Ó Néill: In terms of engaging with bodies like Invest Northern Ireland, for example, to support companies coming into the city region, we have collaborated with North West Regional College and put in place bespoke skills academies for companies like FinTrU and Alchemy, both of which are involved in the fintech revolution that is taking place island-wide but particularly in the north west at present. Such companies have created some excellent graduate employment opportunities and are bringing back some exceptional talent to the city region.

In terms of research, obviously an inability to participate in European-funded research is a huge concern for us all at present. We very much hope that universities within the UK sector can continue to participate in Horizon Europe beyond Brexit in some way. In the past four years Ulster university has been able to double its research income through diversification, partnership and collaboration. Obviously that puts us in a good position, across the institution, to further develop that research piece. Universities deliver research-led teaching and it is absolutely essential that we continue to access funding from all quarters going forward and to do so in collaboration with others is the obvious pathway.

Chairman: I will call on Mr. John Finucane next, followed by Senator Ó Donnghaile. Senator Hoey had hoped to be at the meeting but it does not look like she will make it before we finish. Mr. Finucane is very welcome, as is Mr. Stephen Farry from the Alliance Party.

Mr. John Finucane: I thank Mr. Hannigan and Professor Ó Néill for the presentation today. North Belfast, similar to the north west of the island, has suffered from under-investment, inequality and high levels of deprivation for many decades. The arrival of the new University of Ulster campus in north Belfast is an exciting opportunity to help to develop the area and become good neighbours. I come from a legal background and Professor Ó Néill referenced the law school there. When I was going through my studies - the scramble to become qualified and the lack of patience that one always has at that stage of one's career - the opportunity to do that from Derry was something that was talked about but it was not possible at that time. In that sense, I have some small insight into the significance of the law school which will be there next year and I congratulate everybody involved in bringing that to fruition, including colleagues in my own party.

My question relates to the Magee campus. Magee has a very well earned reputation as a centre of excellence in peace and conflict studies, and conflict transformative works globally. What role will Magee have in post-conflict resolution processes here in Ireland and particularly in the context of this committee, in creating debate on the implementation of the outstanding issues from the Good Friday Agreement?

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: I welcome our guests and want to make a couple of initial observations. First, I note the really positive and transformative nature of this proposal. Mr. Hannigan, Professor Ó Néill and those advocating and championing this are very firmly focused on the future, while understandably and rightfully acknowledging the very chequered history around the broader proposal of development for third level education in the north west. In terms of some of the earlier remarks, it is probably the most significant commitment that a proposal has received from an Executive in the North. That is to be welcomed and encouraged and from the perspective of this committee, we will always try to assist in bolstering and enabling that kind of commitment as opposed to being overly critical of it when it is there.

It should not surprise anyone that the Irish Government has made a significant contribution to this because in the first instance, it has more significant economic clout on the island. It also has an equal responsibility for the well-being, welfare and future development of Ireland as a whole as anyone else. Sharing Ireland means investing in Ireland. That particularly means investing on both sides of the Border to address the historic neglect of the north-west. The witnesses will realise that we are not the Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, but we do have a positive role to play. What role do the witnesses see for this committee? Last week we heard contributions from officials attached to the shared island unit. This was very helpful.

Senator Niall Blaney and Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn have a particular interest in bringing the relevant Ministers from North and South before the committee to speak about this. Would that help this committee to assist and enable the witnesses' work? In light of those observations my question is pretty simple. In the last term we have had several presentations on various issues, and then sin é. They have been very helpful and very informed. Because of the real potential afforded to us by this proposal, there is an obligation on this committee to do a quite significant piece of work. It would be very beneficial to the committee if the witnesses could shape and develop that work.

Professor Malachy Ó Néill: I would like to respond to the comments on the future role of the university in peace and conflict resolution. That remains an integral part of several aspects of our work at Magee campus and throughout the university. I will speak about the Magee campus specifically. The most prominent example is the endowed chair in peace, named in honour of John Hume and Thomas P. O'Neill. It is hugely significant. It is one of the few endowed chairs in the higher education space. It also provides the foundation to bring together cognate areas of peace education and research. Law and social science are huge parts of that.

In recent times we have worked with groups such as Foyle Women's Aid to establish a social justice hub at our Magee campus. Staff at our law school and across the social science faculties have been integral to that. We have also worked with agencies like the North West Community Network to ensure the impact of this is felt by the community and our students benefit from that kind of community and civic engagement. As an institution, we pride ourselves on our civic engagement ethos. I refer to our track record in peace and conflict resolution research. The work of our researchers, particularly at the International Conflict Research Institute, INCORE, has been used globally. At the moment we are looking at the development of a graduate academy

for peace and justice to bring together the work of those various research fields. We also aim to ensure that this research leads teaching in the peace and conflict resolution space. We remain primed to deliver this on our Derry campus.

Mr. Paul Hannigan: I would like to comment on the question of what the committee can do for us. I had a meeting this morning with the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, who has shown a real interest in the shared island unit and cross-Border activity in the education space. Sometimes when we set up these major bodies a lot of the money can be diverted into very high-level projects that do not have an impact on the people on the ground. We would obviously encourage investment in research on a cross-Border basis, but we must look at the impact on the people living in the space where the institutions are located. This cluster was established to support the people in the region. We would like the focus to be kept on that so that people who live here and go through further and higher education can reap the benefit. We can work with the organisations that provide employment opportunities for those who wish to stay here and develop the region. The high-level objectives around infrastructural development and research are really ambitious. We are very supportive of all of that. However, we also have a mission to support the people who live in this region. It is really important that we do not lose sight of that.

Professor Malachy Ó Néill: I have a further comment on the question of what the committee can do to help. Deputy Smith referred to his delegation's visit to the city region and to the campus in recent years. The delegation visited the campus and saw the geographic set-up the partnership enjoys and has engendered. In normal circumstances, the visit of a delegation to Magee campus would be extremely beneficial. I am sure Mr. Hannigan would say the same about the Letterkenny Institute of Technology, LIT. This continuing engagement provides an opportunity to observe how the partnership works on the ground and to see the magnitude of some of the research. When visitors come to Magee campus, they are not expecting to see a magnetoencephalography, MEG, brain scanning device which is the only one of its kind on the island. Visitors to the campus realise that this kind of ground-breaking research is happening on our doorstep. They can see the true spirit of partnership and how the mechanics of that partnership work from day to day.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I know very little about this subject but I have one question for the witnesses. Professor O'Neill just spoke about the phenomenal scale of the research at Magee campus. We have such good universities throughout this island. I have observed some changes in the last 20 years or so. I went to college with a lot of students from the North. The change in the number of A levels required for admission from three to four was significantly offputting. Why would a student study for four A levels when he or she could study for three and get into a top university in Northern Ireland or another part of the UK? We have lost that influx of students and the associated opportunities to share and get to know people. That is missing from undergraduate courses all across this part of the island.

Could the witnesses outline the nature of cross-Border collaboration on any big projects with any of the universities here? What is the nature of those relationships? The scale of what the witnesses' institutions are doing is wonderful and it would be lovely to hear about links with other universities on specific projects.

Professor Malachy Ó Néill: Our most exciting project at present is the much lauded and long-awaited School of Medicine, which will open next year. Our primary partner for that is St. George's, University of London, but one of our major partnerships is with NUI Galway. We have a monthly meeting with our colleagues there, which I co-chair. We benefit significantly

from their experience of developing medical education and research provision in Galway city. We seek to replicate what they have created, learn from their experiences and collaborate with their work at Letterkenny University Hospital and the Donegal Medical Academy. We intend to use that experience to develop our own relationship with the Western Health and Social Care Trust in Lisnagelvin.

Our research and education partnerships with universities across the island are prolific. As one would imagine, most of our academics or external examiners are in universities across the island. Many of our external examiners are from Irish universities. The vast majority of our research activity involves partnerships, North and South. It is much valued and post Brexit there will be an added significance in that regard.

Mr. Paul Hannigan: On collaboration with universities, from our perspective in Letterkenny, the INTERREG projects have been really important in developing research links with Ulster University and Queens University Belfast. Strong collaboration with both universities has meant we have been able to run PhD projects in Letterkenny for students studying here. We would not have been able to do that without their support. That develops our own capabilities to contribute towards the development of the technological university. That ongoing collaboration is really important and has very much strengthened over the past while.

There was an anomaly regarding A levels, which was unfortunate. Some effort has been made to resolve it. It probably had a greater impact on the bigger universities in Dublin in the movement of students in there. My son studies in Northern Ireland so he is a cross-Border student. He gets the benefit of going to Belfast and enjoying that so he keeps up to date on what is happening on a cross-Border basis from a student perspective.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Listening to the contributions, a great deal of that is students who live along the Border going to universities on one side or the other. However, it is about the rest of the island and students from Belfast studying in Cork or Dublin and collaborations involving Cork and Magee or others. This committee and the work of the Good Friday Agreement is about building better relationships and have greater friendships with all the communities across all the island. I appreciate that we have spent a lot of time speaking about Letterkenny and Derry but the relationships between Belfast and Dublin and Belfast Cork are as important. What happened was a shame and it disrupted the flow of people coming. It would be wonderful if that could be changed.

Dr. Stephen Farry: I apologise for joining late. I also apologise if I repeat anything that has been said already. I must declare an interest as a former Minister with responsibility for higher education in Northern Ireland, albeit a few years ago.

I wish to pick up on Deputy Carroll MacNeill's points, which are very relevant. I want to stress that the scope for increased collaboration in higher education, whether research or student flows, is massive and still very underdeveloped. It is very piecemeal. There are barriers to the A level issue, but the vast majority of Northern students in the South are in the Dublin institutions. If one looks at Galway, Cork or Limerick, the number of Northern students tails off dramatically and is probably well below 100 in some of those institutions. When talking about Limerick, it is worth noting the work of J.P. McManus has done with his all-Ireland scholarships which have benefited students with improved access from all parts of the island. They have been very welcome for many people.

On student flows, particularly in regard to the north west, I appreciate this is more on the

higher education front, but it is worth recording that there is a particular issue in terms of the further education provision in that area. The North West Regional College in Derry and Strabane has a very high level of students coming from Donegal. That is a much bigger flow than one would see in places such as Enniskillen or around Newry. There is a long-standing issue with regard to Letterkenny's offering around the level 2 and level 3 provision in County Donegal. This is something that both Governments need to regularise in some form in the coming months.

John Finucane made a point regarding peace studies and the work at Magee. I might clarify something with Professor Ó Néill who might say something about the situation relating to the CAIN archives, which were slightly under threat. I understand some good work has been happening in recent months to try to create a long-term sustainable solution in that regard.

On Northern institutions having ongoing access to Horizon Europe, the partnerships that are being developed, particularly between Ulster University and Letterkenny, will be instrumental in giving Northern institutions some type of route back into Europe. That will be critical into the future.

Ms Claire Hanna: I apologise to the committee. As members are aware, Dr. Farry and I were at the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. I understand Colm Eastwood contributed earlier. I do not want to do that thing of rocking up at the end of a meeting and bletcher on as though one had caught all the details so will leave it to the more informed voices, including the previous speaker.

Ms Michelle Gildernew: I think Professor Ó Néill's contribution might be the first time someone got Ardboe into the Official Report, so I congratulate him on that. As the MP for Fermanagh South Tyrone, I am very keen on the medical school in Magee which has been covered significantly. I believe it will be transformative. My constituency needs to see doctors and medical professionals who want to work and live in the west. It is very important from our perspective.

I want to ask about the other barriers. Every so often, someone will write to me about student funding where they are living on one side of the Border and studying on the other. Is there anything we should raise or do about that?

Chairman: I thank Mickey Brady for waiting patiently. Does he wish to contribute? I am afraid that we cannot hear him, I apologise.

At the heart of this is the support of the Administrations, North and South, the ministerial meetings and the county councils. There seems to be a lot of cohesion and working together. The opening statement referred to the brain drain and making it more attractive to young people to study and stay in the area. How big is the challenge? If this works, how would it look in ten years?

Professor Malachy Ó Néill: The medical school is the most obvious example. The statistic that we often use is that one needs 20-20 when we worked on the case for the medical school, that is that 80% of medical school graduates reside in a 20-mile radius of where they study for a period of 20 years after they graduate. In some cases, that may be taken with a pinch of salt but, in reality, particularly given the graduate-entry model of medical school, these are people at a particular time in their lives with regard to settling down and making long-term commitments and long-term arrangements and so on. It goes back to Ms Gildernew's point about how

areas such as Fermanagh, south Tyrone and the general north west can benefit from that talent development enhancement. Retention is absolutely game changing for the wider community, not just for the academic community, in quality of life and general healthcare. The ability, for example, of small rural GP practices to stay open simply because the talent exists in the local population is transformational for urban and especially for rural communities in this part of the world. That significance is worth identifying.

The same can be said for computing and engineering graduates, other life and health science graduates, social scientists, and graduates from arts and humanities who will make such a huge difference for quality of life going forward. Retaining all of that talent, along with our business graduates, in the north west would be absolutely transformational. Having that network of pathway opportunities from one institution to another, and the ability to go from level 2 onwards, from apprenticeships right through to PhD, within one's own region is exceptional. We as a collective are absolutely committed to delivering on that.

Dr. Farry asked about the conflict archive on the Internet, CAIN, general peace studies and research, and Ulster University's undertaking on that. He is absolutely correct that there has been significant progress on the case for CAIN in recent terms. The general development of peace studies, the continued delivery of research and education in that space, and the Magee campus, is something we are absolutely committed to. A permanent home for the CAIN archive is now confirmed in collaboration with our Ulster University library, which has been transformed and enhanced through a €1.5 million investment in the past year. It has been transformational and we will continue to develop that, we will continue to develop the international networks around the Hume-O'Neill chair, as well as the CAIN archive. We are also working on the development of a graduate academy model that will take in those cognitive areas such as law, social science etc. that will further enhance the offering in peace and conflict studies.

Mr. Paul Hannigan: In response to the Chairman's question, which Professor Ó Néill has also addressed in terms of brain drain and retention of graduates, the retention of graduates in this region has increased significantly over the past ten to 15 years. It really has changed as the industrial base improves around the colleges too. The work of this particular network is enhancing that. I am aware that some of our graduates are taking advantage of the academies that were set up by Ulster University and the North West Regional College in Derry who have worked with Alchemy Technology Services and FinTrU. That is a movement of students and graduates that probably was not happening five or six years ago, but the opportunities are there now and people are doing really well because of it. Our challenge is not to hem people in within the region, if they want to travel and choose to go elsewhere then that is a choice they have. If we can provide the best we can in the provision we have, it increases the number of graduates who want to stay. We can see this happening very clearly in the past while. People are now making the decision that they want to be here. They look at the quality of life and other issues attending to that, but they would not stay if the education provision was not good enough for them. They are making that decision and their parents are making that decision. It is obviously a virtuous circle from our perspective and we want to continue to support that.

Senator Niall Blaney: I thank the Chairman for arranging this session at short notice. It has given Mr. Hannigan and Professor Ó Néill a great opportunity to present so eloquently and so truthfully as they have done. It is also a good opportunity to showcase what is happening in the north west. It has been referred to by a number of speakers as a region that has been neglected so much over recent decades. Moreover, we have two senior people here from the education sector who both live very close to and either side of the Border at Ardboe and Bal-

lyshannon. They bring their skills to the table here because a lot of what is happening in the north west is a result of individuals like them. I do not know Professor Ó Néill long. I met him first two years ago in the context of the community games, and I know from then how co-operative an individual he is. Their willingness to adapt and evolve over time is the reason that higher education in the north west is where it is, and looking to progress as much as it is. It is welcome. It is also welcome that the witnesses outlined the other agencies such as the county councils and local authorities, be they Strabane, Derry or Donegal, and the collaboration that is taking place. That reflects a leadership role and co-operation with other departments across the board. I hope the shared island unit will take cognisance of what has happened here today, including the presentations, and the role that higher education is playing in the development of cross-Border co-operation and the possibilities that this model can create for other parties.

The witnesses were presenting today to one of the Oireachtas committees that is less political than the other committees. There has been a tradition on this committee of being less political and more about co-operation on a North-South basis. That is very welcome and the proposals will be welcomed across the board. We look forward to working on them. Senator Ó Donnghaile spoke to me briefly about the proposal and I will come back to him on that afterwards. I thank the provost and the president for presenting today. I hope we can have cross-party common approach to try to move forward a lot of the issues raised here today.

Chairman: We must finish our session due to Covid restrictions. Does Senator Ó Donnghaile want to comment?

Senator Niall Ó Donnghaile: I appreciate it would be difficult to do this side of Christmas, but based on my contribution and based on the significance of today's presentation, would it be in order as a next step to follow up and to show the committee's support and commitment to this issue to invite the relevant Ministers, North and South, to discuss this issue and the issues brought up by Deputy Carroll MacNeill in the broader all-Ireland context relating to third level and higher education? We might look to do that some time in the new year and remain engaged with the witnesses from today.

Chairman: I thank the Senator. It was a very constructive meeting. It showcases where we can work together on education and our social commitment to our community in terms of regional policy, and in giving better opportunities to young people to live where they have been born, to showcase the talent we have, and to hold onto and attract new jobs and people into the area. I thank our guests for their patience and their presentations. As the meeting went on, I believe they warmed to the challenges of the technology. I apologise to Mickey Brady for the communication issue earlier.

The joint committee went into private session at 3.49 p.m. and adjourned at 3.50 p.m. until 2 p.m. on Thursday, 26 November 2020.