

**DÁIL ÉIREANN**  
**ROGHCHOISTE SPEISIALTA AN TSEANAID UM AN RÍOCHT AONTAITHE**  
**DO THARRAINGT SIAR AS AN AONTACH EORPACH**

**SEANAD SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE UNITED**  
**KINGDOM FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION**

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*Dé Luain, 31 Bealtaine 2021*

*Monday, 31 May 2021*

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Tháinig an Roghchoiste le chéile ag 3 p.m.

The Select Committee met at 3 p.m.

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Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Seanadóirí / Senators	
Malcolm Byrne,	Malcolm Byrne,
Robbie Gallagher,	Robbie Gallagher,
Róisín Garvey,	Róisín Garvey,
Vincent P. Martin,	Vincent P. Martin,
Joe O'Reilly,	Joe O'Reilly,
Mark Wall.	Mark Wall.

Seanadóir / Senator Lisa Chambers sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

## **Business of Select Committee**

**Chairman:** I remind members to ensure their mobile phones are switched off. Apologies have been received from Senator Eileen Flynn. I welcome everyone to the meeting.

The correspondence we have received is from the public transport regulation division of the Department of Transport concerning cross-Border rail and the strategic rail review, which is dated 21 May. We have also received correspondence from the UK European Affairs Committee's Sub-Committee on the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. It is an invitation from the chair, Lord Jay, for a discussion between respective committees. This is something for us to consider and we might get a chance to come back to that at the end of this meeting. There is a request to engage between ourselves and that committee. The difficulty we might have is that we have a reporting deadline of early July and it has a reporting deadline of the end of July. It is for the committee to consider if we want to schedule an additional meeting but it would be a virtual one. We could join from outside the Leinster House campus and we might perhaps get an opportunity to have that engagement before we issue our report, which might be good. We will circulate an email to members and take feedback to see if it is possible to find a date that suits the members of both committees before our reporting deadline.

We move to the draft minutes of the meeting of 24 May 2021, which was attended by officials from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and the Commission on the Administration of Justice. Is it agreed to adopt the minutes? Agreed.

## **Impact of Brexit on the Higher Education Sector: Discussion**

**Chairman:** The agenda for today's meeting is to discuss the impact of Brexit on the higher education sector. I welcome Mr. Gerry O'Sullivan, head of international education, Dr. Aileen Marron, Erasmus+ programme manager and Mr. Tim Conlon, head of policy and strategic planning, Higher Education Authority, HEA; Mr. Jim Miley, director general, and Ms Nora Trench Bowles, head of lifelong learning, skills and quality, Irish Universities Association; Dr. Jennifer Brennan, director of research development and innovation, Technological Higher Education Association; Dr. Michael Mulvey, president, and Dr. Sheila Flanagan, vice president for academic affairs and registrar, Dundalk Institute of Technology, DkIT; and Mr Paul Hannigan, president, and Mr. John Andy Bonar, vice president for research, equality, and external affairs, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, LYIT. We have quite a number of witnesses joining our meeting, which is fantastic. I welcome them all and thank them for their attendance, which is very much appreciated by the committee as we progress our work towards delivering our report in July.

Regarding privilege, witnesses giving evidence from within the parliamentary precincts are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence that they give to the committee. This means that a witness has a full defence in a defamation action or in regard to anything said at a committee meeting. However, witnesses are expected not to abuse this privilege and may be directed to cease giving evidence on an issue at the Chair's direction. Witnesses should follow the direction of the Chair in this regard and are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that, as is reasonable, no adverse commentary should be made against an identifiable third party or entity. Witnesses who are to give evidence from a location outside the

parliamentary precincts are asked to note they may not benefit from the same level of immunity from legal proceedings as a witness giving evidence from within the parliamentary precincts, so they may consider it appropriate to take legal advice on this matter.

Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I remind members that they are only allowed to participate in this meeting if they are physically located on the Leinster House campus. In this regard, I ask all members, prior to making their initial contribution, to confirm they are on the grounds of the Leinster House campus. If they are directed to cease giving evidence by the Chair in regard to a particular matter, they must respect that direction.

I call Mr. O’Sullivan of the Higher Education Authority to make his opening statement.

**Mr. Gerry O’Sullivan:** Go raibh míle agaibh, a Chathaoirligh, a Sheanadóirí agus a chairde uilig as ucht an cuireadh. I thank you very much on behalf of the Higher Education Authority for the opportunity to present to the committee some of our observations on the impact of the withdrawal from the European Union of the United Kingdom.

In 1878, the United Kingdom and Ireland were among the first 11 countries to participate in the Erasmus programme and from that day, Ireland has been represented at a national agency level by the Higher Education Authority.

As we know, in 2020, the United Kingdom pulled out of the Erasmus programme but that impact will not be immediate for the reasons that both countries were able to extend the grant agreement that we have with their higher education institutions by different periods as a Covid response. Ireland will be able to take students from and send students to the UK until May of next year. The UK has taken that extension a bit further and it will remain in the programme until May 2023. That was a Covid measure response and I emphasise has nothing to do with the departure of the UK from the European Union.

Ireland’s mobility pattern to the UK is significant, and particularly so for a number of institutions. In 2019, a total of 355 students went to the UK on mobility. Of that number, 210, the largest share, went on traineeship, which is the European Erasmus term for internships or placements, as we might better understand them. Of that number, half went to London. London is not only the capital of the UK but is also a global capital and hugely attractive from the point of view of students who want to secure better employment prospects in the future. The significant point here is that 10% of our total student numbers up to 2020 went to the UK.

I mentioned the student study visit. The Erasmus pattern is in two particular areas: study visits, where students will enrol in another university or a higher education institution; and traineeships. One hundred and twenty-nine students went in 2019 to 38 different universities in the UK. That relationship is managed under an inter-institutional agreement. That is a significant measure of the co-operation that exists between our higher education institutions and those in the UK and is indicative also of the trust and co-operation that has been ongoing for 33 years. That will be a significant loss, when it happens in the post-2023 period, for our sector.

Equally, the 210 students going to the UK for traineeship, and almost 50% of them going to London, are drawn heavily from a number of institutions, including: Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, with 39; the University of Limerick, with 29; NUI Galway, 27, Limerick Institute of Technology, 21; the National College of Art and Design, 16; Waterford Institute of Technol-

ogy, 14; and Technological University, TU, Dublin, 11. Many of these traineeships are in the areas of hotel management, the hospitality sector, catering, culinary skills, construction, fashion and design. This is valuable experience for every student to have on their CV and it gives connectivity with the world of work in a leading city of the calibre of London, which has the world headquarters of many leading organisations in the various sectors.

The mobility from the UK to Ireland under Erasmus+ is not as large but it is not insignificant, and it has grown from 88 students in 2014 to 110 in 2019. On the island of Ireland, there is also an Erasmus+ dimension because of the existence of two jurisdictions, with more than 600 students from the North of Ireland going on the programme annually. Uniquely among the participating regions of the EU, 68% of its students go on traineeships whereas the European pattern is very much the other way, with 70% going on study visits and 30% on traineeships. Our participation rates from the South are of that order. There are four main providers among the institutions in Northern Ireland, accounting for 96% of total outgoing mobility. Of the 420 students who undertook traineeships in 2019, 66%, or 280, came South, and of that number, nearly two thirds came to Dublin. Therefore, the mobility pattern of Erasmus+ students in Northern Ireland is rather unique. We have a small number, just 37, moving in the other direction, so it affects some institutions but it is not of the same order.

As I come to the conclusion of this part on the Erasmus+ programme, I want to stress that the UK is not going to be eliminated entirely from the programme in the future. Under the present system, Ireland and all other countries in the EU can use 20% of the money we allocate to them for intra-European mobility, so the institutions in Ireland and in other European countries can use that money to send students and staff to what we call partner countries, which is now the designation of the UK. From next year onwards, we will see the return of an action that started in 2015, which is called international credit mobility. This allows us to manage inward and outward student and staff mobility to different parts of the world and, indeed, to all continents. The UK now forms part of a group of countries with Switzerland and the Faroe Islands. They will receive a budget next year and although we do not yet know the amount of that budget, it will support student and staff mobilities in both directions from Ireland and the UK. However, it will not be of a magnitude to sustain the types of mobilities that have been ongoing for 33 years.

The Minister, Deputy Simon Harris, has identified the challenge facing Northern Ireland students and has intimated that the Government will provide financial support for them. That initiative is paused at the moment and it is now due for implementation in September 2022. The management and delivery, and the talks about how that will happen, will resume later this year. While cross-Border student flows are not directly impacted by Brexit, I would draw the attention of the committee to the fact there are about 3,500 students travelling in both directions across the island. Some 1,500 come South from the North, and that has increased from 1,000 at the beginning of the decade. Our figures going North are moving the opposite way but we still have 2,000 students going to institutions in Northern Ireland. Again, it is significant that 50% of those are pursuing postgraduate work.

The area of research is unchanged. Under the EU agreement with the UK, the UK will remain in the Horizon Europe research programme, which is worth €96 billion over the next seven years. In the preliminary period up to the end of last year, a considerable number of conversations had been had on the island between the Royal Irish Academy, the British Council and the Irish Research Council, as well as the Royal Society. This means that there is quite a high level of understanding as to the importance of research on this island, which is brought home, in particular, by an Irish Research Council fact to the effect that 70% of peer reviewers are UK-

based academics. This council has also established a funding programme with the Economic and Social Research Council in the UK fostering relationships across the Ireland-UK landscape in the area of social science. Full degree mobility between Ireland and the UK has not been impacted upon by Brexit, with students from the UK enjoying the same rights and entitlements as Irish students in this country. Equally, Irish students in the UK are treated the same as British students.

Finally, I will refer briefly to the UK Turing programme, which has been developed by the UK in response to the fact it is outside the Erasmus programme. There are significant differences between this programme and what the UK enjoyed under Erasmus, namely, it only supports outbound students from the UK. There is no reciprocal dimension so no inbound supports are provided and it does not cover the area of staff mobility. Institutions in the North of Ireland and other parts of the UK have applied for inclusion under that programme and the decisions will be made known before the end of the summer.

**Chairman:** The Irish Universities Association, IUA, is next. Is Mr. Miley presenting?

**Mr. Jim Miley:** Yes. We will do a two-hander, if that is okay. I thank the Chair and Senators for the invitation to address them today. We provided a more detailed submission and I will give a very brief summary in the next four minutes or so of the key points from that.

As the committee may be aware, the IUA represents eight universities which, together, account for over two thirds of undergraduate students, approximately 80% of postgraduates and 90% of research expenditure in higher education. Today, we will address four key issues of relevance to universities as regards Brexit, student mobility, which Mr. O'Sullivan spoke about, costs and revenue, research and alliance building or partnerships.

To start with student mobility, Brexit is disrupting patterns of mobility in Ireland and across Europe. Mr. O'Sullivan gave a detailed outline of mobility within the Erasmus programme, but there are many other students who move to and from the UK outside of any particular UK programmes. We are seeing an increase of approximately 26% in Irish students who want to study in the UK-based on current estimates, on a base of approximately 10,000 per year at the moment. It remains to be seen whether those applications will translate into offers or places taken up in the autumn. Conversely, we have seen a 40% or so fall-off in applications from students from other EU countries who want to study in the UK. Of course, we need to put a caveat on all of this in that there is a Covid pandemic effect at present, so getting a true picture from which to draw conclusions is somewhat dangerous at this stage. We are seeing some increases in student applications from the UK, including Northern Ireland, but that is from a relatively low base, with an average of approximately 2,500 UK and Northern Ireland students overall coming to study in Ireland each year.

Initial data shows an increase in applications to study in Ireland from other EU countries. It appears that some students who may previously have opted for the UK are now looking to Ireland. Capacity constraints may result in limited potential to absorb those students, however. Irish student numbers, as we know, have increased and will grow by at least 20% over the next decade. This has placed additional pressure on an already strained system in which, as a result of underinvestment, student-staff ratios have risen significantly and facilities require urgent upgrading.

Brexit has also given rise to challenges for universities from a cost perspective. As we know from the rest of the economy, the cost of building materials has risen by in the region of 15%,

which means a potentially significant impact on university building projects that are already under way. It remains to be seen how this will play out. Export earnings from international students in the IUA universities alone is worth close to €500 million per year. That represents export earnings in total. It is crucial that we invest in continuing to support and develop this important source of earnings for the country.

It is suggested that, as an English-speaking country, we have the capacity to attract many more international students who might previously have gone to the United Kingdom, but this will be hard won. The UK is competing aggressively for international non-EU students. Mr. O'Sullivan has referenced the Turing scheme. Most students evaluate their options based on international rankings and quality and cost, factors on which the UK universities score highly. We are going to have a fight on our hands if we want to attract more of those students. I will hand over to my colleague, Ms Trench Bowles, who will briefly address research and partnership issues.

**Ms Nora Trench Bowles:** The UK is a key research partner for Ireland. It is reassuring that the UK has retained its involvement with the EU Horizon Europe programme. This position combined with the benefits of the continued common travel area should help to foster continued collaboration.

With Brexit, Ireland has an opportunity to build our research talent by attracting more top research leaders from the UK. However, our lack of investment in research is a barrier. GBARD is the EU measure of the level of Government investment in research stands. The figure is at 0.93% in Ireland versus an EU average of 1.3% and more than 2% in key competitor countries such as Denmark. We need sustained investment of the order of €350 million per year in our research system if we are to compete with the best in Europe. Attracting top research and academic talent can only be delivered if we have top class facilities. Other key factors that influence decisions to relocate include the costs and availability of housing, childcare and educational opportunities for families.

Brexit raises challenges to the strong links that have been built up over many years between Irish and UK universities. We must continue to build on these in the post-Brexit era. Alliance building is a priority for Ireland in a post-Brexit EU. This depends on being connected and engaged across the remaining EU member states and in Brussels. The universities have a pivotal role to play. Higher education research and innovation are fruitful areas where Ireland can build on the high esteem in which we are held and where we can positively co-operate and lead at European level. The European Universities Initiative offers unparalleled opportunities for Irish universities to build and deepen alliances across the EU as well as to be at the centre of influencing European policy on higher education and research. However, many countries are providing additional funding and supports for such European university alliances and this is crucial for their success. It is important that the Irish Government commits to do likewise. I am thankful for the opportunity to address the committee today.

**Chairman:** Next we have the Technological Higher Education Association. Who is opening for the group?

**Mr. Paul Hannigan:** I will do it, Chairman, if that is okay.

**Chairman:** We will go to Letterkenny first and then to Dundalk Institute of Technology.

**Mr. Paul Hannigan:** My thanks to committee members for the invitation this afternoon.

Similar to Mr. Miley I will make reference to elements of the written submission we have made that are the most important items from the point of view of the committee. We are presenting today with Dundalk IT as the two cross-Border institutions within THEA. We are trying to highlight some of the issues we are pursuing in mitigation of Brexit from our perspective.

In 2018, Letterkenny IT set up a cross-Border further and higher education alliance with Ulster University, North West Regional College and Donegal Education and Training Board. We have worked through that alliance over the past three years to build greater relationships among the four institutions facilitating student flows, engagement around industry research and all those aspects of our work. That alliance has been really important in terms of how we develop those relationships. While we had developed these relationships previously, on this occasion it was important that we pursued a system already set up by local councils. Donegal County Council and Derry City and Strabane District Council had already set up what is called the North West Strategic Growth Partnership. The higher and further education bodies could come together within that to work more collectively. It has been very important that the political and education systems have worked together.

A major gap identified over the period has been in the context of the lack of industry engagement in that space. One of the most recent projects we pursued is the smart industry project. We engaged employers on both sides of the Border to work with education providers and local authorities to set up what we call a smart industry board. The latter identifies skills and education needs on both sides of the Border from an employer's perspective. That board was set up in the past number of months. It is very proactive in its activity in that its members can identify skills needs and education providers can work towards meeting them. We also made sure that the region's skills forum is directly involved in that area.

I am delighted that the HEA is on the call. I thank it, and Mr. Conlon in particular, for the support we received through higher education landscape funding to support that initiative in recent years. It is a project that does not fit neatly into that funding model because it involves a cross-Border element, but we need to think about how we can make it more mainstream. The HEA has provided €750,000 from two different funding sources to us. At the moment, the issue is that there is no more dedicated landscape funding to support the initiative as we move forward. We would like to see some element of that continued or some way of continuing it to be found. We believe we have made and are making an impact. We want that to continue, specifically in mitigation of anything arising from Brexit.

When we came into this, and even in the past 12 to 18 months since we went into the project, things have changed significantly from a political perspective at national level. As has been said at meetings of the committee in recent months, there is really no such thing as any benefit accruing from Brexit. However, one major benefit, from my perspective on a personal and professional level, is that the political system is now concentrating again on the Border. From my perspective, it is very important that the system sees what we are doing, why we are doing it and the benefits to communities, etc., along the Border. That is now in the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future and the New Decade, New Approach agreement negotiated last year. All of these are now coming together to create a policy space for us to move and work in. That is very important from our perspective.

We are committed to working together as a consortium. We are committed, as an individual institution, to working with any other partners in terms of the mitigation of Brexit from our perspective. We look forward to a good engagement with the committee this evening.

**Dr. Michael Mulvey:** We made a comprehensive submission. I will speak about five points within it. We have also included a series of requests. I will not speak about them all but they are there for the committee and I am happy to take questions about them. I will speak about our location, students and staff, enterprise and innovation and research and the technological university. We have a terrific location on the M1 economic corridor. Some 3.3 million people are located within a 90-minute drive of us. We are at the centre of what could be called the multi-polar city of Drogheda, Dundalk and Newry, serving a catchment area in Armagh, County Down, Louth, Meath, Cavan and Monaghan. This puts us in a pivotal position to interact with universities in Belfast and Dublin, and also very much with our further education colleagues both North and South, the ETBs in the South and the regional colleges in Northern Ireland. We are also well-placed to benefit from PEACE PLUS funding which we can access for advancing research, innovation, knowledge cluster development, infrastructure and the climate agenda and to address disadvantaged communities.

In terms of students and staff, 52 members of staff cross the Border. I was going to say that they cross the Border every day. They were crossing the Border every day and hopefully will go back to doing so in the future when we get away from the pandemic remote learning. We have made a particular point of increasing undergraduate recruitment from Northern Ireland over the last number of years. We are experiencing steady progress and a steady upward trajectory in terms of our enrolments. However, there are some barriers in relation to the timing of offers, which arises from the differences between the UCAS and the CAO system in the Republic and the processing of particular types of non-A level qualifications. We have noticed a greater level of queries about the portability of qualifications to be gained in the South following Brexit. Therefore, more promotion around the national qualifications framework would be helpful in that regard. Continued assurance about the stability of the fees regime, specifically, that Northern Ireland students will continue to benefit from the same regime of fees as experienced by Republic of Ireland students is particularly important.

In relation to enterprise and innovation, we are extremely active in that regard. I will touch on a number of points. We have recently developed a corporate partnership development programme which is a key strategic initiative aimed at providing a structured framework for the institute to work with high-profile organisations across industry, community and professions in the region. We work with clusters of energy companies, fintech and engineering companies. We recently collaborated with our neighbour across the Border, the Southern Regional College, on a Brexit research study project conducted by students from each institute, addressing the issues faced by small businesses caused by Brexit. We had a joint submission to InterTradeIreland to fund a pilot concept supporting student enterprise and innovation in the north east. That has been put on hold but, hopefully, with the easing of restrictions we can revisit that next year.

The institute is very active in fusion projects, assisting industry. We conduct, on average, six fusion projects per annum. We have conducted 78 to date and we have won a number of prizes in that regard. We are active in the InterTradeIreland EU-funded cross-Border co-innovate programme with ten projects currently under way, focused particularly on engineering and the schools of mathematics and creative arts. The regional development centre has assisted more than 200 knowledge-based start-up companies. We have assisted 1,600 entrepreneurs and conducted 326 applied research projects. We are very active in cross-Border research. We are a lead partner in a major heart disease programme with Queen's University and a renewable energy project with the University of Ulster, among others. We have a number of asks in that regard, which we can discuss in the questions.

Finally, on the issue of technological university designation, I took the liberty of submitting our vision to become a multi-campus regional technological university. We would be grateful for the support and endorsement of this committee. We would appreciate it. It would allow us to continue our important work in enhancing cross-Border flows of students, assisting cross-Border industry and, indeed, cross-Border communities even more effectively.

**Chairman:** That concludes the opening statements. If it is agreeable to the witnesses, I will open the floor. There are a number of members indicating that they wish to ask questions. Where appropriate, members will direct their questions to the relevant association or organisation. However, if the witnesses wish to contribute at any stage, they can use the hand-raising function or interject. I call Senator Malcolm Byrne.

**Senator Malcolm Byrne:** I thank the witnesses, all of whom I know from a previous life. I thank them for their presentations today. This committee is going to make a report to Government outlining some of the challenges currently being faced by a number of sectors and also some of the opportunities. I have a few questions in which I will ask the witnesses to tell us directly what they want us to include in our report. It follows on from the presentations. I will put all the questions together.

To Mr. O’Sullivan, on Erasmus, obviously there is an opportunity for Ireland in respect of the Erasmus, given that the UK has chosen not to continue as part of the programme. What do we need to do in order to significantly up our game to both attract more students under the Erasmus programme, but also in terms of fostering links between Ireland and the UK under the Turing scheme?

I am conscious that Mr. Miley spoke about the impact of Brexit on the costs of raw materials, particularly in construction. It is an issue that has come up in a number of sectors. Perhaps he could outline some of that in detail, provide members with a few examples and state what he would like us to do about it.

I also have a more general question. Perhaps Ms Trench Bowles or her colleagues might wish to respond. It concerns our research capacity, particularly with regard to the Horizon programme at European level and, specifically, what we need to do to enhance Ireland’s opportunities under the programme. That is dependent on the decision at EU level on some aspects of the programme that we are currently awaiting, and also the extent to which the UK will be involved.

I address my final question to Mr. Hannigan and Dr. Mulvey. They have direct experience in cross-Border co-operation between institutions. As part of the shared island unit that the Government is pushing, what practical measures can we take to encourage cross-Border co-operation between the institutions on this island?

**Chairman:** I think those questions are applicable to all of the witnesses. I will ask the witnesses to respond in the order in which they made their opening remarks. First, I ask the representatives of Higher Education Authority to respond.

**Mr. Gerry O’Sullivan:** I thank the Chair. Perhaps my colleagues, Mr. Conlon and Dr. Maron, might have further points to add.

Senator Byrne asked about attracting students to Ireland. We do quite well in that regard currently. Before the Covid-19 pandemic hit us, 4,000 students were outbound and we were attracting in 8,000 students from the rest of the Europe. Like the UK, we are significantly

oversubscribed because of a number of features. The English language is one of them and the attraction of our educational system is another. The students also like the country and have a very good experience. The reputation has been established by the thousands of students who have come to Ireland. More than 120,000 students have come to Ireland over the past 30 years and they have sent many more students in this direction.

The most obvious answer to the Senator's question from my point of view, in terms of attracting more students and making more space for them, is for more Irish students to go abroad and free up the space. As others have mentioned already, we are continuing to see high domestic demand for places in higher education, which is going to last for at least another decade. Physically accommodating more students in our system is not immediately possible unless we increase the numbers of outbound students. The removal of the UK obviously represents a challenge that is not going to get easier for us.

The Turing scheme is a system that will enable UK students to travel to any part of the world. It will not enable Irish students to go to the UK. At the present, there are some limited opportunities within the Erasmus programme to continue a mobility pattern to that country. Perhaps there could be a similar programme that is domestically driven. Obviously it is a decision for Government to perhaps match the Turing scheme with a similar Irish initiative. That would be a decision for Government to make.

**Senator Malcolm Byrne:** Mr. O'Sullivan has answered the question in respect of the need to get more students going out to different places. Can he provide specific examples of what we can do to encourage more Irish students to take up those places?

**Mr. Gerry O'Sullivan:** We have begun to increase our conversations with all of our European partners in this area. There has to be a very strong message from our institutions that mobility leads to valuable learning and, from our employers, that the type of experience and learning that students gather while studying in another university on the European mainland or working in European industry leads to employability in this country.

We need to improve our language competence. While English will get us to many parts of Europe, our inability to speak other languages is a bit of a barrier. These are good economic times for graduates. They have been finding employment in increasing numbers since the recession. We need to underpin the value of international learning, which brings a type of experience that will be increasingly important because this country needs to engage on a global level with so many different parts.

Mr. Tim Conlon, head of policy and strategy planning, may wish to contribute as he has been very active in dealing with some of the other challenges that face the sector, including Covid and other matters.

**Mr. Tim Conlon:** I thank Senator Malcolm Byrne for his question. North, south, east and west, we have a long tradition of collaboration, particularly in the research space. The capacity of the system is somewhat constrained. Particularly now, in a Covid context, the system is constrained in terms of delivering teaching and learning online, and having to have privilege. There are many things that we would like to do that we have not been able to do. As Mr. Han-nigan said, the Letterkenny Institute of Technology is doing fantastic and important work in the Strabane-Derry-Letterkenny city region. There is an appetite in terms of the capacity of a system to respond and engage with some of the challenges, north, south, east and west.

In research, for example, the grand challenges are exactly that - they are bigger than one nation or one State. I am thinking, in particular, of work the HEA is carrying out on the national strategy in education for sustainable development 2030. Our shared island should be part of that. We are discussing that with our parent Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. I believe the system has capacity and it may need some enabling or freeing up to allow for that.

In terms of the work of the committee, I am sure members are conscious that some of these issues are cross-cutting. For example, education for sustainable development should be as much interest to this committee on a North-South and all-island basis because we share the same climate. In summary, there are lots of opportunities and it would be very useful if the committee called that out in its report.

**Mr. Jim Miley:** Senator Malcolm Byrne specifically asked what could be done about mobility. Education in Ireland is a unit within Enterprise Ireland and is responsible for marketing Ireland overseas as an education destination. Last spring, during events for St. Patrick's Day, which were virtual, as were all events this year, education was stitched in as one of the key pillars for promoting Ireland. The promotion of Ireland as a destination for enterprise and tourism is well heralded and has a strong track record. We need to elevate the promotion of Irish education through the Global Ireland initiative and otherwise. It would be very helpful if the committee could help to advocate for that. That is a two-way street. It promotes Ireland as a destination for international students to come here but it also promotes Irish students to institutions overseas.

The Senator asked about costs. There are two dimensions to that. First, there are significant signs of increased costs associated with key essentials, particularly laboratory supplies for universities. Many of those supplies come from or through the United Kingdom. This issue is not unique to our sector and arises right across the economy. There has been a significant Brexit effect and it has been amplified by Covid. The freeing up of import issues, in the context of general supplies to the country, would help in that and, hopefully, help to mitigate the cost issue.

The second issue is building costs, which I referenced in my opening address, and we have seen that over the last year. There are a significant number of projects that amount to some tens of millions of euro that are under way across the system and we have already seen contractors make claims for additional costs. It is estimated that the increase could be of the order of 15%. Obviously that has been amplified by the Covid scenario and it is amplified by the Brexit effect because a very significant portion of building materials come from the UK. Our universities are aggressively contesting cost claims and will continue to do so. Regrettably, as probably with a lot of building contracts, there will ultimately be an upwards creep in some of those costs. These projects are being funded by a combination of loans through the European Investment Bank with some State supports and some philanthropic money. There is likely to be an additional call on some additional State supports too to get some of the existing projects over the line.

**Mr. Paul Hannigan:** We have mapped student mobility North and South. One of the initiatives that we have put in place has been to add on the foundation degree programmes that have been developed in the North West Regional College. For example, the Letterkenny Institute of Technology tops those off so that students can move after they have completed their programme in the North West Regional College rather than an entry level programme. The initiative has worked really well in terms of students moving south from the North.

I have a son studying in Northern Ireland and I will outline one thing that Irish universities might be interested in considering. When somebody from Donegal decides to study at Queen's University in Belfast he or she is deemed to be an international student and if offered a place on a college course today then he or she will be offered accommodation tomorrow with no questions asked. It is an advantage that students are picking up on and they can see the advantages.

Senator Byrne asked about the shared island unit. The unit has been very good at engaging with the sector and has listened to everybody. A lot of calls are made on its time in terms of where funding should go, how funding should be distributed, and what impact finding that could have. Obviously it is looking at a lot of significant infrastructural projects in the first instance. I think it is starting to now look at softer projects that can have a real impact on people. A lot of that can be delivered through collaboration across the further and higher education organisations and we are continuing discussions with the unit. It is a really good initiative but so many people are looking to get something out of it so we need some direction as to what is being funded and how it is being funded.

**Senator Malcolm Byrne:** Which softer projects have the greatest long-term benefits and that we, as a committee, can recommend to the Government?

**Mr. Paul Hannigan:** There are some specific research projects being considered that can be worked on across different institutions and have a direct impact. For example, here in the north west there are fintech clusters between Derry and Letterkenny. There is the development of skills, research and all that sort of thing through fintech learning laboratories. That is a soft initiative but it is one that can have a direct impact on employment, skills development, etc. in the region. There is also a lot of collaboration between the Letterkenny University Hospital and the Altnagelvin Hospital in Derry. There are some real opportunities arising out of that that will have a direct impact on the populations here. Those sorts of things are really important. There is no infrastructure of physical buildings involved but there are opportunities to make a real impact in terms of the people and that is something we need to keep a focus on as we move forward.

Perhaps Dr. Brennan from THEA would like to discuss the area of research.

**Dr. Jennifer Brennan:** I thank Senator Byrne for his questions and it is good to see him again. On Horizon Europe, which is a real opportunity for Ireland, we have to be very careful to remember that EU funding is meant to be the icing on the cake and is not meant to replace national investment. Our colleagues from the Irish Universities Association, IUA, alluded to the underinvestment in research that is happening in Ireland. This hampers our ability to be able to compete in these programmes.

One of the things which we have not done in the past which we should probably take more advantage of is the ability to match different EU funds together. It is possible to take EU Structural Funds and Horizon Europe funds, for example, together and use them to fund different projects, which is something that we have never really done in Ireland. There are some particular investments around things like what are called the seal of excellence, where a project is deemed to be fundable at European level but there may not be sufficient budget there for it and it can then be funded at national level, if such funds at national level can be found to do so.

Having the UK in Horizon Europe is something of a double-edged sword because while it allows us to still collaborate with it on the big programmes, which is great, and the UK still has some of our top collaborators in Europe, we also talked about trying to increase and attract tal-

ent here which we have lost, in a way, now. People can still, however, apply for big European Research Council grants and for Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellowships with the UK, and it is the most popular country still for those particular programmes.

I will, of course, say being a representative from institutes of technology which are all looking to become technological universities, that the technological universities are a real asset to Ireland and we really appreciate the funding that has been put in so far to build up their research and innovation capacity. We have already seen a 50% increase in EU funding coming into our sector, compared with the Seventh Framework Programme up to Horizon 2020, and we could see a much bigger increase in that if we increase investment. Overall, we need to increase our investment nationally, particularly in infrastructure and attracting talent. The national development plan review is a very good opportunity for this and we, of course, look forward to the new research and innovation strategy. As we get better as a country in research and innovation, we will only see a knock-on improvement in our ability to be able to compete in Horizon Europe and in the other EU funds. We cannot continue doing more with less or to increase our performance if we do not have that underlying investment at national level.

**Dr. Michael Mulvey:** Perhaps I might come in, Chairman, with a few points now, please.

**Chairman:** Yes, go ahead.

**Dr. Michael Mulvey:** I will return to Senator Byrne's question and will then hand over to my colleague, Dr. Flanagan, in a moment.

A dedicated fund, for instance, to drive research collaborations between universities, North and South, would be very welcome for a Border college like ourselves. Likewise, funding to allow a college to attract or to second leading researchers from Northern Ireland universities would help drive collaboration between ourselves and universities in the North and allow research leaders from Queens University Belfast and the University of Ulster to apply for European Union Horizon funding.

My other point is that a dedicated funding scheme was tried by us in a very small way to have research placements for A-level students within Northern Ireland and our region to undertake research projects within the college. This would attract students to the South and into our institutes.

Addressing Senator Byrne, the shared island funding seems to be very heavily driven towards infrastructure and consideration should be given to the funding of shared facilities that would be shared, North and South, through the putting in place of the relevant governance and regulatory instruments to effect that. This works very well in the area of health and there is no reason it should not work in education.

Through the Chair, I will ask my colleague, Dr. Flanagan, to reply with some points to Senator Byrne's questions.

**Dr. Sheila Flanagan:** I thank Dr. Mulvey. I was particularly interested in Senator Byrne's question on the shared island opportunities. He wants to know what the ask is and what we need to put into this report. Alongside the infrastructural needs that exist there are softer needs that could also be targeted through the shared island initiative. I am thinking in particular about the region within which we work. We are right on the Border and it is a region in which there are large pockets of social and community disadvantage both in Dundalk, Drogheda, Newry, Belfast and further back down in the South. Many of our students and in our partner colleges

both in the further education and higher education colleges on both side of the Border are the first in their generation to access higher education. That is critically important for development within the region. The opportunities for us to further engage with our partners in the University of Ulster, in Queens University Belfast, in the Southern Regional College and in the South Eastern Regional College, to continue those further to higher education links my colleagues in Letterkenny spoke about earlier and to develop new and innovative curricula that are responding to the needs of the region are really important.

Taking the area of placement, where many of our students within Dundalk go out on placement, if one looks at our region which is essentially north Leinster and south Ulster, 85% of our students undertake a placement within the region. More importantly, just under 60% of our graduates on graduation are employed within that region of south Ulster and north Leinster. They graduate and stay within that region. Therefore, investment in shared curricula designed to drive economic growth is very important for the stability of this region and is also very important where the shared island unit has the capacity to deliver on this access initiative that we have spoken about and to deliver on the mobility of students. It also has the capacity to deliver on regional development, and very importantly, taking into consideration what we know has happened over the past number of generations in Northern Ireland, I would argue that shared curriculum development which enhances and raises economic development will play a very significant role in deconstructing the binary narrative that has existed throughout the more recent generations. I thank the Chairman.

**Dr. Michael Mulvey:** To address Senator Byrne finally, we set out in our submission where we identified the asks, helpfully we hope, to assist him in having them included in the final report. I thank the Chairman.

**Chairman:** I thank Dr. Flanagan and Dr. Brennan. Does Ms Trench Bowles wish to contribute on that particular topic?

**Ms Nora Trench Bowles:** I thank the Chairman. I will build on many of the points made by Dr. Brennan and will respond to Senator Byrne's specific request for asks. I refer again to the Government budget allocation for research and development, GBARD, which is the level of Government investment in research and we cannot shy away from the fact that here in Ireland it has consistently fallen below 1% where the EU average is 1.3%. In terms of enhancing Ireland's opportunities in Horizon Europe, and crucially in attracting top-class partners to collaborate with, we have calculated that an additional €350 million a year would be needed to bring Ireland in line with the EU average.

There is also something important to flag as to a national system that values basic discovery research and the importance of that for top-class partners.

Finally, on the topic of increasing outward mobility and the crucial link there to foreign languages, we know that the love and capacity for learning languages is something that is built long before higher education. If that is not developed through the primary and secondary schools, it is too late by the time students reach higher education. That joined-up thinking on foreign languages is particularly key.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Trench Bowles for that. I am hoping to pick up a language in my 30s and I hope that I am not too late in doing so. It might be take me a little bit longer than somebody in primary school but that will be par for the course. I might take two members of the committee next, because sometimes there can be some overlap and this will give me a chance to

go around the table again. The next on the list are Senators Joe O'Reilly and Gallagher.

**Senator Joe O'Reilly:** I thank our guests. I found their presentations and all the issues discussed really interesting, exciting and relevant in respect of this area and the future of our country. I found it great. Our colleague, Senator Malcolm Byrne, has ably and correctly identified several key issues on which he has posed questions to the witnesses. There will be a level of overlap in that regard, but I will still pursue some questions and offer some comments.

I live in east Cavan and have an office in Cavan town, and I wish my neighbours in Dundalk good luck in their pursuit of technological university status. In that context, unfortunately, I had to miss the presentation given some weeks ago for Oireachtas members. I regret that greatly, because I would have found it very worthwhile. Turning to a point that may well be echoed by Senator Gallagher later, and he will be well able to speak for himself, the experience of DkIT has been very positive, judging from my area and the people with whom I interact. This is not the subject of today's agenda, but I wish the college well in its endeavours.

I am impressed with the college's strategy of increasingly targeting students from Northern Ireland. In that sense I am completely *ad idem* and enthusiastic about the shared island concept. The key to achieving permanent peace and unity on our island, to which we all aspire, lies in the building and normalisation of interpersonal relationships and people living together in a relaxed and normal fashion. Education and people going through education processes present an obvious opportunity to achieve such an aim. Therefore, I am happy that there is increased targeting of students from Northern Ireland. I hope that will continue and increase, and that students from the South will go North as well. This is a very encouraging initiative and doubtlessly Letterkenny IT is doing the same. It would not be any harm if the witnesses wished to comment further on that aspect and their future intentions in the area. It is certainly very relevant.

All our guests were excellent and enlightening. I was disturbed, however, to hear some of the earlier comments that we will not have the capacity to take in the numbers of people who will wish to come into Ireland as a consequence of Brexit and the UK being outside the European Union. That is a very disturbing prospect. I ask the witnesses to elaborate on that point. A cynic might say the witnesses are just using this subject to cry wolf but I do not think they are. The witnesses might wish to state what facilities they lack in this regard and what initiatives the Government could take, because it would be a tragedy from every perspective to not engage with this opportunity.

People coming here to study become ambassadors for Ireland if they subsequently leave, and not all do, and that is apart from their personal financial, academic and intellectual involvement with and contribution to the country. I am interested, then, in hearing what the witnesses think is required to allow us to ensure that we will be able to take every student who wishes to come here, within the prevailing norms of international travel, visa requirements, security constraints and so on. I am anxious that there should not be a deficit in the number of people we take in future years in higher education, and I ask the witnesses to elaborate on where the existing limitations and problems lie, how the Government might resolve them and what it would take to do that.

I am coming across this issue of the inflation in the costs of building materials, even in very different contexts. It is a major issue and it is going to have an impact right across the economy and it cannot be addressed without being tackled universally. It is a great difficulty which has arisen from several factors, including Brexit, the blockage of the Suez Canal recently and others. It is certainly a problem in all sectors of the economy. I heard from people in clubs recently

that they could not accept their LEADER grants because they would not be able to make up the differential due to inflation in building prices. In the context of what I spoke about earlier, there is a good flow of students between North and South, with more than 1,500 students moving from the North to study in the South and 2,000 from the South moving to the North in 2019 and 2020. Returning to my original point, how much can we increase those numbers?

As the witnesses said, the Erasmus+ programme will continue to involve the UK until 2023, when the UK's Turing programme will take over. It was interesting that 88 students from the UK came here in 2014 and 110 came in 2019, while 210 people from Ireland in 2019 availed of mobility opportunities and study visits in the UK, with half of those going to London. Those students were distributed across a good range of training areas and colleges. That is very important. I ask the witnesses to elaborate on what the Government could do to ensure that such mobility continues under the auspices of the new Turing programme arrangements and that whatever we call it, whether Erasmus+ or Turing, that such activity is still an exciting learning reality for students. Such exchanges lead to enhanced mutual understanding and are good for many reasons. I was impressed not only that 210 people were involved but also by the spread of institutions. It is also critical that traineeships are involved.

My major concern as a person from the Border area, having previously represented a Dáil constituency and representing the region in the Seanad, is to ensure we bring together the hearts and minds of people on our island and normalise relationships. We do not have a border at the moment with regard to physical travel and the movement of goods, and please God it stays that way, despite the trouble over the Northern Ireland protocol. I hope we will not have a border in terms of hearts and minds and intellectual pursuits. That is why I am so positively disposed towards the concept of a greater number of students partaking in exchanges between North and South and having a good holistic experience. I am delighted the Government is sponsoring the Erasmus+ programme for students from Northern Ireland. It is a worthwhile initiative and it should continue.

Those are some of my observations regarding this area. I am conscious of some degree of overlap with the excellent questions raised by Senator Malcolm Byrne but, as a person from the Border region, I feel I should make these points independently as well.

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** One of the advantages, if I can put it that way, of having Senators Malcolm Byrne and Joe O'Reilly speak before me is that I am now struggling to think of a question that has not yet been asked.

**Senator Joe O'Reilly:** I do not think there will be a problem.

**Senator Robbie Gallagher:** I say that in jest of course. I thank the witnesses for appearing. I found the material very informative. It covered a large area, some of which falls outside the scope of our task this afternoon of drawing up a Brexit report. Nevertheless, it is very useful material. I was a member of the education committee during the previous Seanad and I recall much talk at the time about the potential for the Republic of Ireland to snatch business from under the noses of institutions in the UK in areas such as third level research. Has that potential manifested? If not, where are we falling down in our pitch for that business?

A number of speakers touched on our ability to attract more students from the point of view of our existing capacity. Ms Trench Bowles mentioned a lack of investment over the years. That is a major concern for us and calls to mind the Cassells report and the recommendations flowing from it. Where does that report fit into today's conversation? It is a can that has been

kicked down the road for some time now. The Chairman referred to it this morning in the Seanad. It is an issue that needs to be grasped. Where does it fit in to today's discussion?

Dr. Mulvey and Mr. Hannigan referred to a shared island and capacity. I sat in on a presentation from Dundalk Institute of Technology a few weeks ago. It was very informative in relation to technical university status and DkIT teaming up with other institutions down the road but I was more excited about the cross-Border potential, which has not been fully utilised. Incidentally, that is not the fault of the educational sector. I would like to see what more we could do and what recommendations we should include in the report to move that on to a different plane. Dr. Mulvey alluded to DkIT teaming up with the University of Ulster and Queen's University Belfast on a number of issues but it is doing so on its own initiative. We need a more national approach.

Mr. Hannigan gave good examples of what is happening in Letterkenny Institute of Technology. Coming from that neck of the woods, I am familiar with Donegal County Council teaming up with Derry City and Strabane District Council and the great progress that has been made. In health, the relationship between Letterkenny University Hospital and Altnagelvin Hospital has grown. This shows the potential for co-operation. How does the current political unease in the North act as a barrier to fast-tracking the ambitions the institutes of technology have in the educational sphere?

If I could end on a lighter note, while the welfare of all of Mr. Hannigan's staff and students is always a concern, there is one member of his staff whose current good health and well-being concern me greatly, namely, Michael Murphy. How is Michael's hamstring healing up. Mr. Hannigan might comment on that.

**Chairman:** We will go in reverse order this time.

**Dr. Michael Mulvey:** I thank Senator O'Reilly for his kind comments about DkIT. Without wishing to repeat some of the earlier points, I reassure the Senator that we are focused on systematically attracting more students from Northern Ireland. That has involved a professional marketing campaign. As I indicated, there are some technical issues relating to differences between the UCAS application system and the CAO system. The issue is a bit technical but we could supply more information on that. More promotion in Northern Ireland about the educational opportunities in the South is one area that could be worked on. That must obviously be done sensitively because one has to be conscious that there are institutions in the North. Participation rates in higher education in certain counties in the North are not as good as in the Republic. There is a role for us there. Promotion and, as I said, reassurance around qualifications and support in the South, would greatly help that.

We draw students from across all communities in Northern Ireland but there is an imbalance.

We draw from one more than another. That is an issue that merits study, reflection and consideration. This select committee could be of immense benefit. The shared island unit could also be of immense benefit. It is to ask the question, what is it that we could do? We have often asked here, internally, in DkIT, what can we do that would make even just the look and feel of the campus resonate that little bit more with all the communities in Northern Ireland. There is a piece in there that bears some study and research.

Before handing over to Dr. Flanagan, the other point I would make is that without exception,

the students from Northern Ireland - certainly those who come to study in the Dundalk Institute of Technology - are all enormously happy with their experience here and with their qualification. Likewise, their parents are enormously satisfied with what is provided within the Republic of Ireland. That may be an important point to note as well.

Moving briefly to Senator Gallagher's points about the pitch for business, lack of investment and so on, we all know that the fiscal crisis and the subsequent reduction in investment posed challenges for Southern institutions. I need not rehearse it too much. It certainly is an issue and of course it affects our ability to attract students from abroad.

With those comments, I want to hand over to Dr. Flanagan, who, I know, will have some valuable comments as well.

**Dr. Sheila Flanagan:** In response to Senator O'Reilly, obviously, one is interested in increasing capacity where possible. To build on what Dr. Mulvey has said, through a targeted marketing campaign over the past number of years we have got into schools that previously we would never have been able to access. The doors are now open. They are interested in hearing what we have on offer because parents want their children to stay within the region. They want them to be educated within the region. They want the opportunity for them to gain employment within the region. Those are the drivers we are finding on the ground. The opportunities are there if we can access the schools directly and attend the UCAS fair. This year has been particularly difficult because we have not been able to go out and into the field and attend the fairs we would normally attend and visit the schools that we would normally visit. Hopefully, that will return to normal next year.

One quick simple solution in terms of easing access to Dundalk and all of the colleges would be a bit of a relaxation in CAO dates. This year, for example, the offers coming out from UCAS will happen on 10 August. The CAO, we are led to believe, is likely to begin making offers on 17 August. If I am a student in Newry, for example, who is interested in coming to Dundalk and if I get my offer for the University of Ulster, Southern Regional College or Queens on 10 August, I am more likely to take it out of having a sense of security than to wait a further ten days for the CAO offer to come. If we could make early offers to students from Northern Ireland that are comparable with UCAS or round zero offers in areas of lower demand - I accept totally that in the high-demand areas such as medicine, nursing, veterinary medicine etc., that is difficult and there are capacity issues as these are high demand areas - there are plenty of areas where there is capacity and we have the space to take such students. With a focus on those areas and moving our offer dates back to match with UCAS, that would be a simple quick win.

The second area where we could increase capacity and build a more long-term partnership is through working with the colleges of higher and further education in Northern Ireland. For example, we are currently working with Cavan Institute, Southern Regional College and Drogheda Institute of Further Education, DIFE. Any limitations we might have on-site in Dundalk with regard to capacity could be eased by further collaboration with our friends and partners in those colleges and by creating networks of student mobility. The Border does not exist, and I am sure our friends in Letterkenny would say the same, when it comes to this type of mobility. The limitations on capacity can be eased if we work together in this way. Landscape funding has been hugely helpful in developing that type of initiative. Whether that is replaced through the shared island initiative or a dedicated fund for colleges on the Border, such as ourselves and Letterkenny, to work to increase capacity, it is much needed.

**Dr. Jennifer Brennan:** I will comment on cross-border research. There has been a lot of

focus in previous years on larger programmes like the Horizon and INTERREG programmes. These are big research grants that run into the millions of euro.

If we want a pipeline of collaboration with Northern Ireland, we need to think about a staircase of funding opportunities from very small things like the Ulysses programme we run with France, which allows a small grant for people to visit another institution. It is about €2,500 for each participating institution. If we had something similar cross-border, it would be helpful. There are also things like the Irish Research Council's New Foundations programme, which could be used with a particular strand to look at seeding collaborations with institutions in Northern Ireland. It could include medium-sized grants that would allow two PhD students to be shared between two principal investigators, one north and one south of the Border and go right up to large-scale research centres.

I will comment on bringing talent and experienced researchers here and attracting people from the UK. Our colleagues from the IUA alluded to this. It is not just about the funding, which is challenging, but what they find when they come to Ireland. That includes the cost of accommodation, childcare, healthcare and educational and employment opportunities for their families. There is a nice programme offered by Science Foundation Ireland called the research professorship programme where a researcher can be brought in but the institution needs to be able to find the salary for this leading researcher, which can be challenging. There is a stream in the programme for joint appointments, but it requires a 50:50 split of time between the UK institution and the Irish institution, which is not easy to get somebody to agree to.

A programme is being piloted in Waterford Institute of Technology involving joint professorships with the UK with an 80:20 split. The researcher from the UK agrees to spend 20% of their time in Waterford institute and the remaining 80% in their home institution in the UK. There are plans to appoint six of these. The first was appointed a couple of weeks ago and the second is on its way. At the moment, the Science Foundation Ireland programme would not cover that, so the institute is looking to resource it itself. It is important to note the Science Foundation Ireland programme only covers science, technology, engineering and mathematics, STEM, research, so there is a gap in the ability to attract talented researcher in arts, humanities and social sciences.

**Mr. Paul Hannigan:** I will comment on a couple of points made by Senator Gallagher. First, Michael Murphy will be okay. I reassure the Senator on that. We hope that will be okay.

On the broader political context, the local authorities have come together strongly around this and built up the concept of a north-west city region, which has got recognition within the national development plan. That has been an important development in tying down the North-South collaboration element and the benefits that can accrue to the region.

Nobody can argue against education. Everybody benefits from it, from the access agenda right up to the provision of PhDs. Something can be provided to everybody. That is the benefit we have which we can bring into this forum. We are regularly asked to present to this forum on what we are doing but it is always to a political system. We say what we are doing and how it can benefit the relevant region. We do not sense any objections from any political parties on this side of the Border or on the other side. That is a strength of the collaboration and it would apply to Dundalk and to any other educational institutions engaging on a cross-Border basis. This is something we have to continue to build upon.

Some 13% of our staff live in Northern Ireland, which is a significant percentage. The

mobility between Derry and Letterkenny is such that the Border-crossing between the two is the biggest in the country for people accessing work, education and everything else on a daily basis. It is part of who and what we are. That comes through in the work we do. People are easy and comfortable with each other in that space. We recognise that there are issues from a bigger political perspective. There may be issues as to whether the assembly succeeds or not over the coming days. We will have to work with that. On the ground, there is strong political engagement with the local authorities. That is embedded and supported at a national level and through the North-South Ministerial Council. All of those things are in place. For the higher education players within that, it is an easy space to play in because we know we have political support. We have been here previously when we did not have such support and were isolated. We are in confident in what we are doing, what we can do and what needs to be done. We will continue to plough that furrow.

**Mr. Jim Miley:** I will pick up on the capacity constraint issue that Senators Gallagher and Joe O'Reilly raised and the challenges around that. Senator Joe O'Reilly rightly questioned whether this could be viewed as a cynical play for funds. I am reminded of the Oscar Wilde quote that a cynic is someone who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. It is very much the value aspect that the system is looking at. We hear a lot of conversation these days about challenges to our corporate tax rate. Whenever that plays out, we will certainly not see an improvement in our competitive advantage. At best, we will hold our own but there could be some slippage. That leaves our talent and innovation capacity as the prime cards we have to play to attract inward investment and in our economic activity. It is no accident that, despite the enormous challenges of Covid over the last 15 months, our tax base has held up really well. It has done so because universities and institutes around the table produced a talent pool for sectors like medtech, biopharma, information and communication technology and agri-food. All the key economic clusters around the countries are supported by the top talent pools produced through higher education. It is very much a value proposition we are talking about.

On capacity, last autumn we faced a major challenge. We have a new Department and Minister and a Government that has made a particular statement about the position in which it sees higher education and research in the economy, which we hugely welcome. We are working closely with the new Department in that regard. All the colleges and universities around the table stepped up to the plate last autumn in finding of the order of 500 extra places, some of which arose from the demographic bulge that is happening because of population surge and some of which arose because of the Covid grades inflation issue and the changes to the leaving certificate. We have seen revised statistics from the Department of Education showing projections for students exiting secondary school over the next decade on the highest end of their original expectations. On average, we will have an extra 3,000, and probably up to 4,000 or 5,000 in certain years, coming to the doors of Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, UCC, TCD and all the other colleges throughout the country. That is just the Irish students, before we even think about trying to build capacity for Northern Irish, UK or non-EU students. We face a real challenge there.

Going back to the question of what we can do about this, there is a funding issue. I will give the committee one critical statistic in this regard which speaks to the funding and staffing issues. Apart from the funding challenge we have endured in the system over the past decade, we are also subject to the employment control framework, which essentially means that the sector cannot hire additional permanent staff. In 2008, there were 19,300 core-funded - that is, funded through the State grant - staff in the system overall looking after 155,000 students. In 2020, 12 years later, we still had the same number of core-funded staff and they were looking

after 213,000 students in the system. That is what the system has done. The fact that we are still producing high-quality graduates and top-notch research is a huge testament to the quality of the staff and the management in our universities and institutes of technology, but we pull the thread very thin. We really welcome the signal from the Government that it will address this matter this year but we now need the voice of this committee in pushing for that funding challenge to be met on a sustained basis over the next decade. If we do that and loosen the strings around the number of permanent staff we can have, I think we will be able to meet those capacity challenges, be they from Irish, UK or Northern Irish students.

**Ms Nora Trench Bowles:** I will again flag value added, Ireland on an international stage and the challenges that we know are coming down the line when it comes to corporate tax. I repeat that higher education and research are very positive and fruitful areas where we can take a lead and co-operate very well at a European level. I take this opportunity again to mention the European universities initiative. There are a number of pilot European university alliances ongoing, and the popularity of Irish higher education institutions is remarkable. We are very sought after when it comes to being partners in these alliances. The excitement surrounding these alliances and their potential cannot be overestimated. They will sit at the centre of European policy when it comes to European education area and the European research area in the coming years. We are, however, thwarted somewhat by the fact that our Dutch, French and German partners in these alliances have national or regional level funding and supports for the EU level funding which we simply do not have here. I repeat the call to capitalise on the opportunities of these European university alliances. We need that national level support. This goes back to Dr. Brennan's points about joining the dots between the European level funding and the national level funding.

**Mr. Gerry O'Sullivan:** There are so many fascinating topics being raised here that we could discuss them all for a significant amount of time. One of the issues we need to establish and separate in our minds is that there is a difference between students who come here for Erasmus, students who leave here for Erasmus and other students who come here for full degrees. Students on Erasmus go for short-term study and work periods of a maximum of 12 months but the period is usually much shorter. Students who come to Ireland from within the EU are entitled to move here freely under membership of the Union. Students from outside of the Union pay significant fees and are a particular target group for Ireland. Some of these students are impacted significantly by Brexit, some less so. In attracting fee-paying foreign students from outside of the Union, one of the attractive features is the student's ability to stay back in Ireland and work in the economy. Currently, the maximum period allowable for this is two years for a master's or a PhD and 12 months for an undergraduate, but I understand the UK has now extended its stay-back period to three years. That means it will compete more aggressively for those types of students. Within the Erasmus programme, our role as a national agency is to get more Irish students and staff to go out; we have no direct responsibility to support incoming numbers. Nevertheless, by virtue of the fact that we encourage outward-bound students, we do attract inward-bound ones. How can we capitalise on this? The measure of the challenge is that there are 27,000 students going to the UK from other member states. How could Ireland accommodate 27,000 more students? It would be significantly challenging for our country, let alone the higher education sector. We also must remember that the Netherlands, for example, teaches more courses in English than we do, so it is not an automatic *sine qua non* that Ireland is the most obvious destination for these students.

As for other students coming from Europe, we have several thousand students on full degree programmes in our universities, institutes, part-private institutions and other colleges, so our

relationship with the European mainland is significant. One of the things we did not get around to talking about is the European Education Area, which is a priority of the current Erasmus programme, and which developed out of a European Council meeting of the 27 member states, partly in response to Brexit and partly due to the fact that if the EU was being developed and established today, education and research would be all over it. When it was established in the 1950s, coal, steel and atomic energy were the drivers of economic activity. Education now is playing that type of role. We need to look at how we can build closer collaborations with our European colleagues. It is not all about numbers; it is important we look at the depth of the relationship and how embedded it is in our teaching, learning and research and the professional development of our staff.

My colleague, Dr. Marron, might speak a little about inclusion. Financial barriers are being addressed. They have been a problem for our institutions for their youngsters to get out in Ireland. I mentioned the numbers earlier: 200 or 300 students from the North of Ireland who take up professional traineeship posts in the South. That is a very solid statement from students that they see themselves as part of an all-Ireland labour pool. They are contributing to the talent on this island. That is important to retain, and the Minister's decision to continue to fund that is very important.

Before I pass to Dr. Marron, I will comment on Michael Murphy and the GAA relationship. LYIT has gone a step further and made him head of sport, which is a significant development. Interestingly, in the development of the Irish diaspora, the single most important business network in Asia at the moment is the GAA. Members, who are young professionals, are finding work and places to continue their careers. That is significant. Twenty per cent of the association's membership is now outside of Ireland. For a traditional organisation, that is phenomenal. Of course, the president of the GAA is from the New York board. Ireland is changing rapidly. Education is playing a huge part. It is not just about transactions; it is about collaborations and the quality of them. Dr. Marron might add something because the new Erasmus programme has a lot to say about opening opportunities for students from under-represented backgrounds.

**Dr. Aileen Marron:** Apologies, my connection dropped as Mr. O'Sullivan was making his point. Would he mind repeating it?

**Mr. Gerry O'Sullivan:** Yes. It was about the new opportunities under the Erasmus programme for inclusion, as well as the successes. It has been built on something that has been successful in the past five or six years.

**Dr. Aileen Marron:** I thank Mr. O'Sullivan. In 2014, the HEA initiated additional funding for students with fewer opportunities. This started as a €120 top-up to their monthly Erasmus grant. In the most recent 2020 allocation, this increased to €180. Back in 2014, just under 7% of students with fewer opportunities had participated on the Erasmus programme. This has now increased to just under 17%. The European Commission, as part of the new programme, has increased its support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds up to a flat rate of €250. That emphasises the importance that the Commission now places on inclusion in the programme into the future.

**Chairman:** I call Mr. Conlon.

**Mr. Tim Conlon:** I would like to comment on the points made by Senators O'Reilly and Gallagher. They raised some interesting issues, which some of my colleagues have covered. I would like to comment on capacity and the agenda for strategic internationalisation are im-

portant to our institutions. We see this in the HEA when we meet with and discuss these issues with these institutions. As colleagues said, it is not just about student numbers, but about the broader, long-term collaborations and relationships that are sustainable between institutions, based on a quality student experience. Our international education strategy has seen numbers grow from 8% to 15% over the past four years. There has been a significant growth in our systems. Some 15% of students are now international. I make that point not to be discordant, but because it is important that we do not get 100 students from the same place, in the same college programme or cohort. That is not a very international or Irish experience. The mix or blend of international students and North-South and so on, is important. Senator O'Reilly said it best when he said that these students are ambassadors for our country when they leave. The quality of their experience is, therefore, something we have to be cautious about.

I would take the opportunity to mention some of the significant State supports that were made available this year. Mr. O'Sullivan has mentioned visas for example and the stay-back. Across Departments the significant supports during the pandemic for international students was something that should be commended. There were research project extensions, taxis were provided for students to bring them safely from airports to their institutions, and so on. The State, therefore, did a lot to maintain the quality of the experience for international students. Again, as Senator O'Reilly said, when those ambassadors go back to their countries, we want them to have had a good experience, not a negative one. There was, therefore, a lot of cross-government working and collaboration to protect our higher education system, our Irish students, and indeed our international students.

Senator Gallagher mentioned attracting talent to our shores. In that context, I would like to mention the senior academic leadership initiative. Again, we can provide the committee with more information on that in the future, if required. The senior academic leadership initiative addresses significant imbalances in female academic staff at high levels in our institutions. If one goes into certain subject areas, such as heavy maths and so on, the representation of female academics is significantly less than their male counterparts. Under that programme, we have been highly successful in attracting some very high-profile, high-calibre figures from the UK to Irish higher educational institutions. They come here for the inclusivity aspect and for the opportunity to work in a quality environment. The fact that as a nation we value inclusivity and that agenda has been important. The point I am making in terms of that capacity issue, is that we have a great product to sell, but we have to be careful not to oversell it. We have to protect the quality of that product. For that reason, there will be some constraint in capacity. However, it is important that the quality of the student experience, the staff experience and the system, are hallmarks internationally. We have to be careful to protect that.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Conlon. That was good timing. We are approaching our two hour mark when we have to vacate the premises. All members who have indicated that they would like to come in have done so. I want to sincerely thank all ten witnesses who were in attendance today. It was very good for our committee hearing and it worked well. On that note, I thank sincerely all of our witnesses. There were ten witnesses in attendance today, which was very good for a committee hearing. It worked well across the board because of everyone's professionalism. I thank the members and the witnesses for that.

From the Irish Universities Association, I thank Mr. Jim Miley and Ms Nora Trench Bowles. From the Higher Education Authority, I thank Mr. Gerry O'Sullivan. Dr. Aileen Marron and Mr. Tim Conlon. From the Technical Higher Education Association, I thank Dr. Jennifer Brennan, Dr. Michael Mulvey, Dr. Sheila Flanagan, Mr. Paul Hannigan and Mr. John Andy Bonar. I

thank them all for their time this afternoon.

Their contributions will be of great assistance to us as a committee as we move towards finalising our interim report in July. It is a topical issue that affects all parts of the country, but in the context of Brexit in particular, it is bringing new opportunities and challenges that the witnesses are clearly working very hard on.

We anticipate that we will have completed our first draft of the report by 15 June. We aim to release the interim report in the week commencing Monday, 5 July 2021. That may move or shift as we progress through the work programme.

On behalf of the committee, I thank the witnesses for attending, the committee members, and the members of the public who have watched this meeting.

The select committee adjourned at 4.56 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 8 June 2021.