

North–South student and staff mobility in further and higher education on the island of Ireland

**– a Royal Irish Academy
discussion note**



Introduction

Recent years have seen positive growth in North–South engagement and cooperation within the higher education sphere, particularly in respect of funding support for R&D collaborations, as well as growing recognition that student mobility and higher education co-operation can offer a range of practical benefits for both jurisdictions. At the same time, the number of Northern Ireland (NI) students attending higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) has declined. This is reflective of the impact of a variety of external pressures, including uncertainty arising from the UK’s exit from the European Union, UK internationalisation strategies for higher education, an undervaluing of the social and cultural benefits that may arise from North–South student mobility, as well as practical barriers, including:

- a lack of information about universities in other jurisdictions
- the high cost of living in ROI
- unfamiliarity with ROI Central Applications Office (CAO) applications process
- the smaller number of previous ROI graduates; and
- the change in the ‘equivalencies’ between A-level and Leaving Certificate grades within ROI CAO process for third level education (IBEC-CBI, 2011).

A 2021 discussion paper on the role of regions and places by the Royal Irish Academy’s Higher Education Futures Taskforce called for the enhancement of staff and student mobility options on a North–South and East–West basis (2021a).¹ The paper notes that, while educational migration is a common occurrence throughout the UK and Ireland, Northern Ireland is an outlier amongst other UK nations, as it has a combination of high levels of students leaving to study elsewhere and a low number of incoming students. Over 17,000 Northern Ireland-domiciled students were studying outside of Northern Ireland in 2018–19. Despite these high outward numbers and evidence that many NI students choose to leave for reasons other than course choice or the availability of student places, the numbers of NI students choosing to study in ROI HEIs remains low (ibid.). The taskforce’s work on equality, diversity and inclusion also considered the issue of cross-border access, calling for the removal of barriers, particularly the harmonisation of funding and recognition of credits, to North–South and South–North student mobility (RIA, 2021b).

¹ Royal Irish Academy, 2021, The role of regions and place in higher education on the island of Ireland. A discussion paper by the RIA Higher Education Futures Taskforce. Accessed at: https://www.ria.ie/sites/default/files/he_futures_-_regions_and_place_discussion_paper.pdf

I. The equivalencies issue for A-level holders

At present, all applicants for a higher education place in ROI apply via the CAO system. The purpose of the CAO is to process the applications for the first-year undergraduate courses offered by its member organisations in ROI (as listed in the CAO handbook) centrally, and to deal with them in an efficient and fair manner. The member HEIs agree admissions policy and points requirements for all courses.

A-level results are converted to CAO points using a published scale. There is an ongoing concern that the conversion of A-levels to the CAO points system fails to adequately recognise A-level achievements and can put A-level applicants at a significant disadvantage to those applying on the basis of points awarded from the Leaving Certificate examination.

A 2011 study by IBEC-CBI Northern Ireland suggested that the problem stemmed back to 2005, when the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS – the organisation responsible for managing applications to higher education courses in the UK) altered the A-level/Leaving Certificate (LC) equivalences. Whereas each LC subject was previously considered to have half the points value of an A-level, following a review this was moved to having two-thirds the value. This effectively devalued A-levels against LC results. Following this change, many ROI admissions offices started to require NI students to have four A-levels (with A and, later, A* grades) for high-demand and high-point courses such as Medicine, Dentistry and Law. This change became a significant barrier for NI students, as only one in eight students in NI do four A-levels. One side effect of this is that it is at times notably easier for NI students to access HEI courses in Britain than the equivalent course in Ireland. This increases the attractiveness of studying in Britain for NI students, who are competing with Leaving Certificate students for high-point courses such as Medicine, Law, and Computer Science.

Moving forward: Recent years have seen greater attention paid to A-level equivalencies by the CAO, but further investigation and action could be considered on the part of ROI HEIs, who set the points and entry requirements for courses, to ensure that NI students with A-levels are not unduly disadvantaged at the application stage.

A current project by Trinity College Dublin is examining the feasibility of offering a set number of places per course to NI students with only three A-levels. Students applying to TCD from NI in the 2021/22 academic year will be eligible for all of the places that will be filled in the normal way through the CAO system, but a fixed number of places (maximum three per course) will be set aside for the purpose of the feasibility study, which will allow students to access any course with only three A-levels. Students taking four A-levels are also eligible for places offered through the feasibility study – their best three subjects will be considered for places offered in the study. The results of the feasibility study will be shared with other Irish HEIs to see if this offers a possible mechanism through which to address the A-level barrier.

Of interest also is the idea of an all-island application system for places in higher education. The CAO Board requires that courses for inclusion in the CAO Handbook should have statutory recognition in ROI. In general, this has meant that terminal awards are made by Irish Universities, Institutes of Technology or by Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI). This requirement would have to be revisited and expanded to allow for the inclusion of courses where the award is made by an alternative recognised body, such as the awards made by an NI HEI.

2. Non-educational factors

The RIA's Higher Education Futures discussion paper on the role of regions and place notes:

Figures obtained by the Department for the Economy NI (the department responsible for further and higher education) from UCAS show that, each year, the number of Northern Ireland students who applied only to, and were accepted at, institutions in other parts of the UK ('determined leavers') is much higher than the number of Northern Ireland students who have a firm NI choice but who ultimately accept an offer in Great Britain ('reluctant leavers'). These figures would suggest that there are other significant factors motivating students to leave Northern Ireland beyond the availability of places and these may also be reflected in the limited likelihood of them returning after graduation (2021a, 13).

Improving North–South student mobility requires greater popular support for such decisions and better public awareness of the benefits to the student and island. The benefits of choosing to study in Ireland should be publicised and promoted amongst students on both sides of the border. As testament to the need to drive home this message, the 2021 UK Turing scheme funding results show that only 0.61% of UK students chose ROI as their study destination; this suggests that ROI is not overly attractive as a destination for either NI or British students.² If the benefits of an all-island HE area are to be achieved, then it will be necessary to ensure that students are aware of and buy into this vision, and understand the benefits it could have for them personally as well as for the island as a whole.

The RIA's discussion paper on regions and place notes:

The increased competition for places in Northern Ireland has inevitably raised entry qualification tariffs in the local universities. A-level and other pre-university entry qualification grades are correlated with socio-economic status. In the absence of further affirmative action measures, it seems likely that 'reluctant leavers' from the lower social groups are being forced disproportionately to leave Northern Ireland to obtain HE (paying higher fees and accumulating higher student debt) or having to bypass the opportunity for higher education. (2021a, 13)

An awareness campaign promoting the attractiveness of studying in ROI could therefore point to advantages such as closer proximity to home, possible eligibility for a loan to cover the cost of the student contribution charge and free tuition fees for those resident in NI for three of the previous five years.

Moving forward: Ireland's HEIs actively publicise their courses and offerings to attract international students: similar campaigns in Northern Ireland to promote the attractiveness of Irish HEIs to students in Northern Ireland could emphasise the advantages to NI students of studying in Ireland and raise awareness of the new opportunities arising from, for example, the establishment of the technological university sector.

² Of further note is the exclusively outward mobility focus of the Turing Scheme, which precludes students and staff in Ireland from application to it to support inward mobility to Northern Ireland.

3. Grow the pool of opportunities for cross-border PhD education

The report of the Academy's Higher Education Futures Taskforce on research and innovation (R&I) specifically identified doctoral training as a potential area for greater co-operation on an all-island basis given the importance of skilled researchers to the future success of R&I in both jurisdictions (2021c). The paper recommended greater attention be given to measures to facilitate graduate mobility between HEIs on the island of Ireland for research studies, noting that such an initiative would provide greater postgraduate and undergraduate student mobility and would have the mutual benefit of retaining talent on the island. It further pointed to the potential learning that could be drawn from the experience of the Nordic countries in which an HE area has been utilised between EU and non-EU member states. (2021c, 14).

The opportunities to do this in terms of North–South mobility are reasonably well established. There are no nationality or residency barriers for NI applicants in gaining access to available PhD places. NI students can apply for PhD studentships (covering fees and maintenance) in a similar manner to applicants from ROI. Also, candidates from NI can access Irish Research Council Government of Ireland scholarships (as can international students) without restriction.

In recent years a limited number of North–South schemes have emerged, actively encouraging more co-operation in PhD experience and training, e.g. the SFI-DEL Investigator Award programme (now ceased), the North–South Postgraduate Scholarships by Universities Ireland (albeit with minimal funding), or as part of European funding programmes. Such schemes, as yet very limited, are effective in enabling greater mobility of students from each jurisdiction to access PhD opportunities across the border. These are welcome and should be further expanded, provided they run alongside (rather than replace) more equitable government-funded postgraduate research studentships, which fund the vast majority of PhD places available in Ireland's HEIs.

However, PhD applicants from ROI can face considerable barriers on the grounds of residency in accessing places in NI HEIs. As noted in the documentation prepared by the (NI) Department for the Economy on 'Postgraduate Studentships: Terms and Conditions (Academic year 2021/22)', to be eligible for consideration for a Department for the Economy (DfE) Studentship, a candidate must satisfy eligibility criteria based on a) nationality and b) residency. In respect of residency, 'the candidate must be ordinarily resident in the UK or Islands, including the Channel Islands and Isle of Man, for the full three-year period before the first day of the first academic year of the course'. For candidates from ROI, the following criteria are specified:

- ROI nationals who satisfy three years' residency in the UK prior to the start of the course may receive a studentship covering fees and maintenance.
- ROI nationals may receive a studentship covering fees only if the candidate doesn't have three full years' residency in the UK and Islands but has been ordinarily resident in the area comprising the UK, Gibraltar, EEA and Switzerland for three years before the start of the course.

These DfE Terms and Conditions present a considerable barrier to candidates from ROI accessing PhD-level education in NI. Data obtained from the Doctoral College at Ulster University for admissions in September 2021 show that, across all disciplines and faculties, only 3% of PhD applicants from ROI were offered DfE awards; this compares with 27% of all applicants from NI, and 12% of applicants from England/Wales/Scotland. Thus, PhD applicants from ROI are at a clear disadvantage under the current NI funding system for higher education. This also limits the pool of talent available to NI universities.

4. ERASMUS+

Continued participation, on both sides of the border, in the Erasmus+ programme should be protected from any future budgetary cuts or changes, as it is an essential element in the internationalisation of the island's higher education system. The Irish government's commitment to fund NI students' participation in the ERASMUS+ scheme post-Brexit is an important catalyst for the region. Ensuring that students benefit from educational opportunities abroad will be beneficial both to their own individual learning, but also to the institutions they return to. The commitment of the Irish government does not include continued provision for EU students to come to NI, which has a low percentage of students from outside the region relative to other parts of the UK and Ireland.³ Continued access to the ERASMUS+ programme for NI students is dependent upon their home institution in NI agreeing to the student's temporary registration at an Irish HEI.

According to figures from the Higher Education Authority, 280 students from NI went to ROI for a work placement under Erasmus in 2019, while 229 went to ROI in 2018. The majority of those work placements were in Dublin for students taking degrees in vocational qualifications, such as Computer Science or subjects related to financial services. These are high-profile areas of research and education in ROI, primarily due to the large number of multinationals in these areas that are headquartered in Dublin. However, as the ERASMUS+ programme continues, with the assumption that the Irish government will continue funding for NI students to access the programme, a greater effort must be made to promote the entire range of disciplines and expertise available to students on both sides of the border, as well as the intercultural experience and learnings that can be gained through cross-border study.

Moving forward: Dialogue should be encouraged between the relevant government departments in ROI and NI, and between NI and ROI HEIs to address possible barriers to NI student participation in ERASMUS+. The Royal Irish Academy and/or Universities Ireland could provide a useful forum for such dialogue.

³ Royal Irish Academy, 2021, The role of regions and place in higher education on the island of Ireland. A discussion paper by the RIA Higher Education Futures Taskforce. Accessed at: https://www.ria.ie/sites/default/files/he_futures_-_regions_and_place_discussion_paper.pdf

6. Explore the opportunities offered by the PEACE PLUS Programme to support North–South student mobility

The PEACE PLUS programme is an excellent example of continued UK-EU-ROI-NI cooperation post-Brexit to promote peace and prosperity in NI and the border regions of Ireland. It aims to contribute to a more peaceful, prosperous and stable society in NI and the border counties, and to leave an enduring legacy by funding activities that promote peace and reconciliation and contribute to cross-border economic and territorial development. The programme's strategic objective is to build on the opportunities and address the needs arising from the peace process, with a two-fold aim: to boost economic growth and stimulate social and economic regeneration; and to promote social inclusion, particularly for those at the margins of economic and social life.

In April 2021 the Royal Irish Academy, supported by funding from the Communicating Europe Initiative at the Department of Foreign Affairs, convened a virtual roundtable discussion focusing on how the higher education and research sector can positively engage with the impending PEACE PLUS programme to achieve the maximum impact in furthering higher education and research on the island of Ireland. A key objective was to raise awareness of the opportunities within the PEACE PLUS programme for collaborative projects within the higher education and research sector that could be conducted on a cross-border basis. These projects could build important research networks and links between NI and ROI HEIs and research staff, and could also be beneficial in progressing the aims of the programme. However, the roundtable and subsequent conversations and engagement made it clear that many researchers, particularly in ROI, were unaware of the collaborative opportunities that existed through the programme, and also had a limited understanding of what counties and areas were eligible, etc. Further work needs to be done to investigate how the PEACE PLUS programme could contribute to research collaboration and staff mobility.

Participants in the roundtable, who came from a wide variety of institutions on both sides of the border, believed that universities can and should play a key role in supporting and implementing PEACE PLUS, given their track record of involvement in previous programmes and their contribution, through research, teaching and learning, to issues such as conflict resolution, innovations and definitional issues for the PEACE PLUS programme. They suggested that universities could function as resource spaces, including as venues providing shared space, and as centres for the identification and dissemination of best practice in policy-driven activities. They also agreed that it could be useful if the higher education sector supported mainstreaming work and activities and helped to develop platforms for network- and collaboration-building, as well as projects to put partnership-based research in place (Royal Irish Academy, 2021 d⁴).

Moving forward: Greater student mobility between HEIs on the island of Ireland – both North–South and South–North – should be supported for the benefits it offers students in terms of access to a wider array of higher education courses and infrastructures, the opportunity to build strong social and cultural ties between communities, and the development of ever stronger links between HEIs in support of shared goals of peace and prosperity on the island. The Academy's Higher Education Futures Taskforce discussion paper on regions and place concluded:

The potential negative impact of Brexit on border areas in Ireland and Northern Ireland is of major significance. Focused efforts should be established in order to lessen this impact via tertiary education and research through support for collaborative HE and FE programmes involving targeted inputs

⁴ Royal Irish Academy, 2021, Report from the RIA roundtable on the Peace Plus Programme and higher education and research. Accessed online at: https://www.ria.ie/sites/default/files/discussion-paper-ria-roundtable-on-the-peace-plus-programme-and-he-and-research_0.pdf

from institutions on both sides of the land border. This should be a priority for PEACE PLUS and Shared Island Initiative funding. (2021a, 8)

Looking ahead, the Royal Irish Academy suggests consideration be given to:

- Greater provision of specific information for NI-based third level applicants on how to apply to study in Ireland, the supports available to them and the equivalency process for entry-level qualifications. The online resource 'Education in Ireland', hosted and run by the Department of Education and Skills and Enterprise Ireland, could offer a specifically targeted section on the website addressing the frequently asked questions of NI students. Letterkenny Institute of Technology (now part of the Atlantic Technological University) provides exactly such an excellent online resource for NI applicants.⁵
- A social media campaign directed at students and teachers in NI outlining the opportunities and supports available to NI students who wish to study in ROI, and for students wishing to study in NI, including advice on the CAO application process and range of courses available in ROI HEIs.
- Dialogue on the possible factors that may inhibit the temporary registration of NI students to ROI HEIs for the purpose of accessing the ERASMUS+ programme. Bodies such as the Royal Irish Academy and/or Universities Ireland could provide a safe forum for such discussions.
- Ensuring regular review by the CAO HEI member institutions of the points and entry requirements, CAO application process and conversion scheme for A-levels to guard against unintended barriers to access for NI students.

Changes in the education landscape accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic mean that improved mobility and access could be facilitated by a blend of virtual and in-person models, rendering physical mobility, with all of the extra obstacles this can entail, an optional extra rather than an absolute requirement for participation. HEIs on the island can play a leading role in developing this flexible provision, which can support better access for students across the island.

Finally, in the future, we should also expect to see more staff mobility between HEIs, industry and external organisations, with academics regularly collaborating with external stakeholders (companies, NGOs, civic organisations), ensuring that curricula and teaching practices are up to date. In this way, mobility will come to have a greater meaning than it has now. It will not simply be about the ability to move between HEIs on either side of the border; it will be about movement between different types of organisations, in either jurisdiction, with a focus on bringing the experience and learning gained back to their HEI. This type of mobility and improved range of experiences offered both to staff and students will ensure that higher education can stay connected with the needs of industry and society, and will help the individuals to gain a broader perspective on how their research and educational areas of interest fit into other environments and businesses, etc. While we strive to improve cross-border mobility and opportunities for staff and students, we must also remain cognisant of this broader way of viewing the issue of mobility and ensuring that there is an island-wide effort to guarantee that education on the island of Ireland is not inhibited by jurisdictional issues or by constraints within the institutions themselves.

⁵ See: <https://www.lyit.ie/Study-at-LYIT/How-to-Apply-for-Full-time-Undergraduate-Courses/CAO-Northern-Ireland-UK/Further-Advice-Northern-Ireland-UK-Applicants>

References:

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IBEC-CBI Northern Ireland, 2011

Further information

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