

Royal Irish Academy Brexit Taskforce Survey Results: Impacts and Opportunities for Higher Education and Research on the Island of Ireland post Brexit

Survey Results Analysis no. 1 / 2017



The Royal Irish Academy, Ireland's leading body of experts in the sciences, humanities and social sciences, established a high-level Brexit Taskforce in March 2017 to consider how the higher education sector can best address the implications of the UK's exit from the European Union (EU) and identify potential sector strategic priorities for Ireland's Brexit negotiators.

In May 2017, the Taskforce surveyed the academic community on the island of Ireland to gather their views on the potential impacts and opportunities arising from Brexit for higher education and research. This paper provides an analysis of the survey findings and will be followed by a comprehensive report, including recommendations and a wider data analysis, in Autumn 2017.

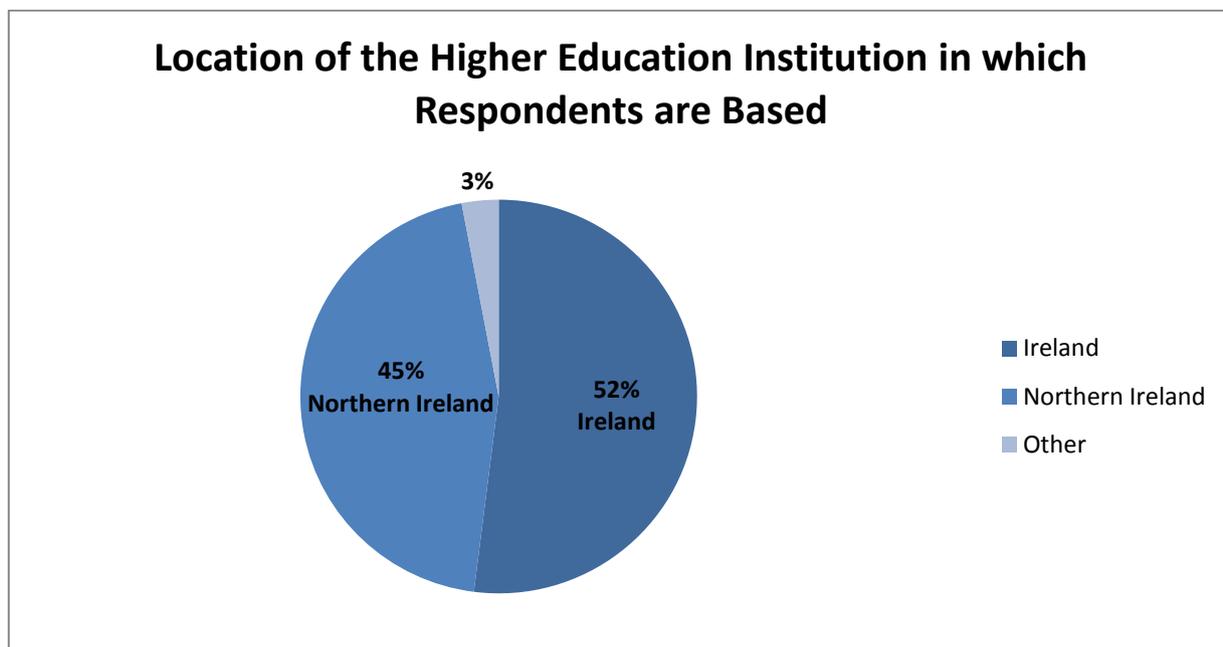
Summary

- 390 survey responses: 52% of the survey respondents were located in Ireland; 45% in Northern Ireland.
- Respondents recorded strong levels of agreement when asked if Brexit would have a significant impact on Higher Education and research on the island of Ireland.
- Respondents recorded strong levels of agreement when asked if Brexit is likely to impact negatively on North- South collaboration in the medium to long-term.
- Respondents agreed that collaborations between U.K and Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) are very important in their academic/research field, highlighting the need to continue to facilitate such collaborations post-Brexit.
- The shared land border between Ireland and Northern Ireland is recognised as a unique and important issue: respondents frequently drew attention to the importance of an open border to allow academic and research staff and students to travel freely.
- 66% of respondents believe Brexit will have a negative impact on the Higher Education Sector in Ireland. This increases to 96% when asked this question in relation to Northern Ireland.
- Respondents in Ireland identified the potential to win more EU funding, and attract international students and academics to Irish higher education institutions as key opportunities. Associated actions with these opportunities included: (i) initiatives to improve foreign language skills in Irish HEIs and (ii) international marketing of Ireland as a Higher Education and Research Destination.
- Respondents stated a belief that Brexit negotiations should ideally promote conditions that enable UK-Ireland collaborations, facilitate the continued mobility of staff and students, and secure future UK participation in EU research and innovation programmes.

Overview of Survey Respondents

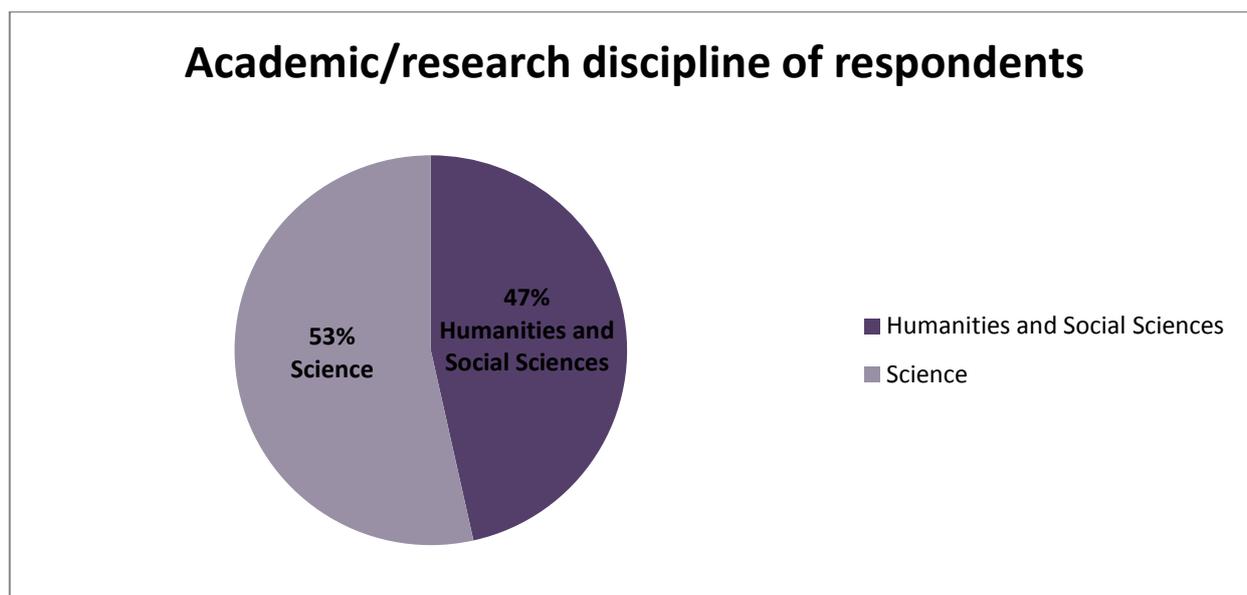
The survey was distributed widely to Royal Irish Academy members and grant awardees, the Irish Research Council's networks of early career researchers, and university and Institute of Technology's Vice Presidents /Directors of Research in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The survey asked respondents to indicate the location of the Higher Education Institution that they are currently based in:



As shown in the chart, 52% of respondents are currently based in the Republic of Ireland, 45% in Northern Ireland and 3% were either based elsewhere or elected to not say.

The survey then asked respondents to identify their discipline:



Survey respondents consisted of slightly more academics from science disciplines at 53% than humanities and social sciences disciplines at 47%.

Perceptions of the Potential Impact of Brexit on the HE Education and Research Sector

The survey asked respondents to rate their agreement with a series of statements in order to measure their perception of how significant an impact Brexit was likely to have on the Higher Education and Research sector.

Table I: Impact of Brexit on higher education and research on the island of Ireland

Please rate your agreement:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Brexit is likely to have a significant impact on the Higher Education sector in the Republic	2%	8%	21%	45%	24%
Brexit is likely to have a significant impact on the Higher Education sector in Northern Ireland	2%	2%	6%	27%	63%
Brexit is likely to impact negatively on North- South collaboration in the medium to long-term	2%	6%	14%	42%	35%
Collaborations between U.K and Irish institutions are very important in my field.	2%	5%	14%	34%	45%

Table I shows respondents levels of agreement with the statements put forward: respondents primarily either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the statements.

In relation to the statement *Brexit is likely to have a significant impact on the Higher Education sector in the Republic*,

- 45% of respondents 'agreed' and 24% 'strongly agreed'.
- 21% offered no indication of their agreement
- 10% believed that the impact would not be significant for Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland.

The same statement was then posed pertaining to Northern Ireland. Agreement on the significance of this impact was even stronger with

- 63% 'strongly agreeing' and 27% 'agreeing'
- 4% of respondents 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed'.

When asked to respond to the statement *Brexit is likely to impact negatively on North- South collaboration in the medium to long-term*,

- 77% of respondents either ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’.

This indicates widespread concern for North-South academic and research collaborations post-Brexit.

The final statement, *Collaborations between U.K and Irish institutions are very important in my field*, assesses the degree of co-working and collaboration between the academic and research sectors in Ireland and the UK.

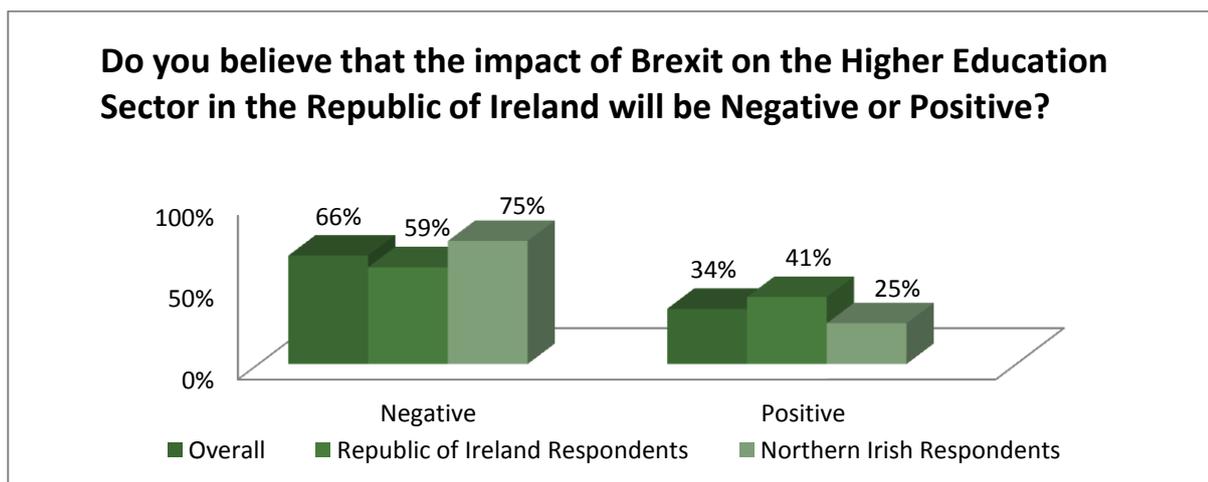
- 79% of respondents ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ that collaborations between both countries are significant in their discipline.

This highlights the importance attached to UK-Ireland academic and research collaborators by academics north and south and suggests a need to further consider how best to facilitate and promote this collaborative research culture post-Brexit.

A comparative analysis of the Humanities and Social Sciences and Science respondents showed no significant disparities between the disciplines in relation to their perception of these statements.

The survey then asked respondents to declare their opinion on whether or not the impact of Brexit would be positive or negative for the higher education and research sectors, north and south.

Chart I: Impact of Brexit on Higher Education (Ireland)



As illustrated in Chart I, **66% of respondents believe Brexit will have a negative impact on the Higher Education Sector in Ireland and 34% believe that the impact will be positive.**

Interestingly, when the Northern Ireland respondents are looked at separately, the results show a variation in perceptions. The number of respondents who expect a negative impact drops to 59%

in Ireland and increases to 75% in Northern Ireland. The number of respondents expecting a positive impact increases to 41% in Ireland and drops to 25% in Northern Ireland.

These findings suggest respondents in Northern Ireland are more likely overall to believe the impact of Brexit for higher education and research in Ireland will be negative. In contrast, respondents from Ireland show a more positive outlook.

Chart 2: Likely impact of Brexit (Northern Ireland)

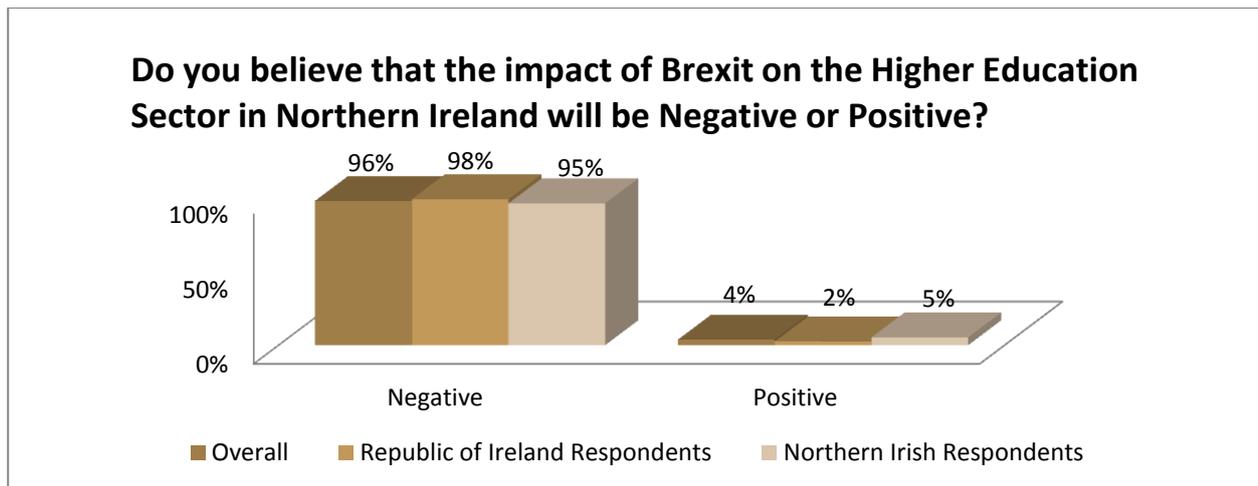


Chart 2 shows that almost all respondents believe that Brexit will have a negative impact on Northern Ireland with little variation between the two sets of respondents.

Potential Opportunities from Brexit for Higher Education and Research on the island of Ireland

The survey collected and analysed the key emerging themes of qualitative responses based on the question:

In your opinion, what opportunities might arise from Brexit for Higher Education and Research on the island of Ireland?

Respondents from Ireland outlined several potential opportunities from Brexit. They noted that there may be:

- **Potential to win more EU funding** if U.K researchers become ineligible to apply. The UK are, at present, net beneficiaries of EU funding so their departure from these initiatives could increase the competitiveness potential of Irish based researchers. However, in a later question, a large cohort of the respondents indicated a preference for the U.K continuing to be eligible for the scheme.

Respondents also stated that there may be opportunities now for HEIs in Ireland to:

- **Attract international students and academics** who might otherwise have gone to the U.K. They also observed that Ireland might be more favourably positioned to win additional funding via **the EU's Marie Curie Skłodowska Actions and Erasmus+ programmes** if the U.K. no longer participates in these programmes post-2019.

Northern Irish respondents overwhelmingly stated that they could see no benefits or opportunities which could be gained for Higher Education and research in Northern Ireland as a result of Brexit. This viewpoint was also reflected in the responses of their counterparts in Ireland and was a common theme throughout all of the survey answers.

Measures to Support International Research Collaboration

The survey collected and analysed the key emerging themes of qualitative responses based on the question:

What immediate measures can be taken to support international research collaboration?

Respondents in the Republic of Ireland drew attention to

- The need to **improve foreign language education** in Irish HEIs.

They expressed concerns that the current level of foreign language skills among academic staff would be insufficient to support Ireland's ambitions to deepen its international collaborations with EU MS and non-EU countries in the context of the withdrawal of the only other English language country in the EU. Many respondents highlighted the need to:

- **Increase the number of students studying languages at university level.**

In relation to attracting academic staff to work in Ireland, they suggested that incentives be offered immediately to assist with this through an **international recruitment drive**.

A further emerging theme in the responses related to **the marketing of Ireland abroad as an attractive location for Higher Education and research**. Many respondents favoured additional measures to increase Ireland's visibility as an attractive and viable destination for international students and staff. Improved marketing of Ireland's R+D capacity and infrastructure was seen by some as a positive measure to help attract industry projects and collaborations.

Respondents also saw merit in an:

- **Immediate increase in investment and levels of funding available for PhDs and research collaborations and partnerships to strengthen international research collaboration networks.**

Attention was drawn again to the need to ensure that **mobility of staff and students** north south, and between Ireland and the U.K. remained unimpeded.

- Respondents overwhelmingly favoured the **retention of the Common Travel Area** in its current form and opposed the return of a hard border.

Respondents in Northern Ireland frequently referenced

- The importance of an open border.
- The need to retain existing funding mechanisms and arrangements for north-south research collaboration
- The importance of retaining access to the major EU framework and innovation programmes.

Respondents from Northern Ireland were more likely to express concerns regarding the issue of **student fees** and the potential scenario whereby UK students would be required to pay international fees in EU institutions and vice versa. **They asked for financial assistance to be provided for students and for assurances to be given immediately to halt a decline in registrations.**

Brexit Negotiation Priorities and Key Asks

The survey asked:

What should the Higher Education and Research priorities for Ireland (North and South) be in the EU/UK Brexit negotiations?

The most prevalent response from academics in both the North and South to this question was to **preserve existing collaborative research and academic arrangements**. Academics and researchers do not want to see their work and potential advancements in their field negatively impacted by agreements made in the Brexit process. The continued facilitation of research collaborations regardless of border boundaries was seen as a clear priority for the sector within the context of the Brexit negotiations.

Respondents again called for **academic and research mobility to be protected** and **retention of the Common Travel Area**. They also called on Government to ensure that adequate levels of funding are available to researchers post-Brexit so that their work may continue.

Respondents in the Republic expressed a preference for **supporting the U.K should it wish to remain a part of the major research funding initiatives** but would require financial and other commitments by the UK to the EU. Similarly, Northern Irish respondents called for continued access to EU programmes, particular the Erasmus+ and MCSA programmes.

Respondents, north and south, were united in their belief that research knows no borders and should not be encumbered with unnecessary obstacles and red tape post-Brexit.

Further information

The Royal Irish Academy/Acadamh Ríoga na hÉireann is Ireland's leading body of experts in the sciences, humanities and social sciences. The Academy champions research, and identifies and recognises Ireland's world class researchers. It supports scholarship and promotes awareness of how science and the humanities enrich our lives and benefit society. Membership of the Academy is by election and is considered the highest Academic honour in Ireland.

The Academy is the only pan-island higher education institution in Ireland with a specific north-south remit and offers a trusted, safe forum for cross-border discussions amongst leaders in higher education and research.

The Academy's Brexit Taskforce is focused on areas of common ground including the many existing positive relationships and collaborations in this sector between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and Ireland and the UK, and the EU, and will suggest pathways to secure these into the future. It is also considering what other steps should be taken to secure the future competitiveness of the island's higher education and research sector in the specific context of Brexit. To further its work the Taskforce has established two parallel working groups to examine the issues in Ireland and Northern Ireland chaired respectively by Professor Jane Ohlmeyer, Trinity College Dublin, and Professor Gerry McKenna, University of Ulster. More information on the Taskforce including its full listing of Members is available at <https://www.ria.ie/news/policy-and-international-relations-policy-working-groups/launch-ria-brexit-taskforce>

The Academy would like to express gratitude to survey respondents and to all of those who helped us to distribute it widely, particularly the Irish Research Council, the agency that funds early career researchers and basic frontier research, who facilitated the distribution of the survey to Early Career Researchers to ensure that their views were represented.

For further information on these survey results please contact

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