



North South Student Enrolment in Tertiary Education

Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science by the Irish Universities Association (IUA)

Session 1: 11.00 – 12.30, Tuesday 21st February 2023

1. The Irish Universities Association (IUA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the discussions on north-south student enrolment, in particular recognition that significant barriers to progress remain in the higher education system in the Republic of Ireland where our eight university members are located. The IUA universities have a long history of contributing to peacebuilding and cross-border cooperation on this island, so we recognise the need to develop a more strategic approach to north-south student enrolments, as well as wider cooperation across higher education activity. Recent funding initiatives in research and innovation to assist in addressing societal and economic challenges on our island have provided renewed opportunity for collaboration across academia. Similar initiatives to address wider student enrolment issues are required.
2. The passage of the recent Higher Education Authority Act, with outlined responsibility to promote North-South cooperation, could provide a new strategic impetus to address some of the challenges that I will outline in this opening statement. Furthermore, the move by DFHERIS to create an integrated tertiary education sector in Ireland is an opportunity for enhanced cross-border student mobility.
3. Strategic decision-making on cross-border enrolments has been hampered by the underinvestment in higher education over the last decade. Delivery on Government's commitment of an additional €307 million annually to bring HE funding back up to the level required for a globally

competitive, knowledge-based economy will go a significant way towards ensuring that the university sector can meet the challenges and opportunities of increasing North-South enrolments. Underinvestment has likewise reduced the capacity of the sector to engage in outreach activities which are required if we are to attract significant numbers of students from Northern Ireland.

4. In addition, as noted by the Committee's recent report, differences in the upper-secondary education and examination timelines constitute a barrier, and this has been significantly exacerbated by the continuing delays in releasing Leaving Certificate results since 2020. Even pre-Covid, there was a very tight window between Leaving Certificate results and acceptance of course places in the Republic. This timeline represents a challenge to the smooth transition for Leaving Cert students to higher and further education and places a huge strain on students and universities. The timelines operated by the State Examinations Commission do not allow the CAO and Irish universities to make earlier offers, resulting in difficulties for NI applicants with A-Levels, but also causes significant issues for Leaving Certificate students seeking to secure a place in an NI university (or indeed anywhere outside Ireland) in a timely manner. The consequence of this lack of alignment between Leaving Cert and A-level timeframes means that applicants from outside the State are significantly disadvantaged in the process and will have received offers to universities in other jurisdictions first. Consequently, it is no surprise that the conversion of applications to admissions has fallen significantly. Without real cooperation cross-border and a commitment to reforming Leaving Certificate examinations and results timeframes, any real progress will remain hampered.
5. As noted in earlier hearings of the committee, and evidenced by HEA and CAO data, cross-border undergraduate student numbers continue to decline. The most recent CAO figures for NI applicants are included in Appendix 1 of this statement. A significant proportion of students from Northern Ireland attending higher education in the Republic largely attend four of the universities – Trinity College Dublin, Atlantic Technological University, UCD and University of Galway, along with Dundalk Institute of Technology. Among IUA members, at undergraduate level, NI students are concentrated in high points courses in the health sciences, business management, arts and social sciences. It should be noted that the combination of higher points applications to universities in urban areas with acute accommodation shortages appears to be a key factor in low levels of conversion from applications to acceptances. The rising cost of living, coupled with unprecedented accommodation and travel costs, will

undoubtedly continue to depress potential student enrolments in our universities from Northern Ireland. The IUA has called for additional capital investment to support universities to provide increased student accommodation.

6. Cooperation on the North-South Research Programme funded by the Shared Island Unit demonstrates that progress can be made if system-level funding and support is put in place. Of the funded projects, 19 have included PhD student places, helping to grow the number of postgraduate research students cross-border. This is an important area of focus post-Brexit given the challenges for colleagues in the north on research collaboration and funding.
7. A further area where there is scope for development is in the strengthening of guidance support to potential students, with relevant and up-to-date information on possible pathways and opportunities that teachers and guidance professionals can promote on both sides of the border. The IUA welcomes the ongoing work by DFHERIS on a 'single portal' for career guidance, as well as the work spearheaded by the Department of Education on a lifelong guidance framework. These projects provide an opportunity to include North-South considerations. The IUA is keen to engage in this dialogue and to seek solutions to the range of issues that are currently hampering deeper North-South cooperation in higher education and research.
8. In conclusion, for North-South enrolments to improve:
 - A. Funding must be increased to build capacity for greater outreach work in NI and vice versa.
 - B. The delayed timelines for Leaving Certificate results must be addressed urgently, and a strategic system-level vision is required to support the universities to attract NI students.
 - C. The Shared Island research programme should be expanded with further post-graduate places for NI students.
 - D. The accommodation / cost of living issues need to be addressed for NI, as for all students, if the barriers to entry are to be overcome.

With the 25th anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement approaching it would be a valuable opportunity for government to set out a plan for increased north-south student mobility and for higher education to play a greater role in cross-border cooperation.

I welcome any questions and look forward to the discussion here today.

Appendix 1: Applications, offers and acceptances by NI domiciled students to HEIs in the Republic of Ireland, 2014 – 2022

Students with NI address:	Applications at close of season	<i>% change on previous year</i>	Students receiving Offers	<i>% change on previous year</i>	% offers/ applications	Nett Acceptances	<i>% change on previous year</i>	% acceptances/ offers	% acceptances/ applications
	<i>Total</i>		<i>Total</i>			<i>Total</i>			
2014	1238		708		57%	286		40%	23%
2015	1569	27%	879	24%	56%	361	26%	41%	23%
2016	1903	21%	1098	25%	58%	347	-4%	31%	18%
2017	1847	-3%	1092	-1%	59%	388	12%	36%	21%
2018	1636	-11%	942	-14%	58%	331	-15%	35%	20%
2019	1378	-16%	812	-14%	59%	299	-10%	37%	22%
2020	1429	4%	803	-1%	56%	285	-5%	35%	20%
2021	1439	1%	811	1%	56%	246	-14%	30%	17%
2022	1421	-1%	754	-7%	53%	218	-11%	29%	15%

All data provided by and with permission of CAO.