

North South Education Mobility

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

Session 2: 12.30 – 14.00, Tuesday 13th February 2024

1. The Irish Universities Association (IUA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the discussions on North-South education mobility, in particular the ongoing challenges of encouraging and supporting higher education students to cross the border in either direction for the purposes of study.
2. The IUA universities have a long history of cross-border cooperation on this island, so we recognise the need to develop a more strategic approach to North-South student mobility. 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 mobility issues are required.
3. Following recent work by this Committee and the ESRI, the universities have now agreed a revised set of equivalences for students presenting A-Levels for admission to undergraduate programmes. These revised equivalencies – which are specifically designed to take into account changes in A-Level participation rates in Northern Ireland in recent years - have been approved by the relevant governance bodies of each university and will apply for students seeking admission in 2025. The new equivalences will be piloted by the University of Galway in 2024.
4. While these revised equivalencies are important, it is doubtful whether they will of themselves lead to significant increases in the numbers of students from Northern Ireland studying in the Republic. As noted in earlier hearings of the committee, and evidenced by HEA and CAO data, undergraduate student numbers travelling south of the border continue to decline. The most recent CAO figures for NI applicants are included in Appendix 1 of this statement. This data shows us that only around 30% of these students who currently receive the offer of a study place through the CAO actually accept this place. This low acceptance rate compares -for example – with an average acceptance rate of over 75% across all higher education institutions in the Republic. If we are to effect lasting change in North-South student mobility, it is clear that other obstacles will also need to be tackled.
5. One of these obstacles is the continuing delay in releasing Leaving Certificate results each year 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 their families, as well as on universities. The timelines operated by the State Examinations Commission do not allow the CAO and

Irish universities to make earlier offers, resulting in particular difficulties for NI applicants with A-Levels. It 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. Applicants from outside the State are therefore significantly disadvantaged in the process and are likely to have already accepted offers of places from universities in other jurisdictions, where these offers are made long before the State Examinations Commission releases Leaving Certificate results. Consequently, it is no surprise that the percentage of those students from Northern Ireland who apply and subsequently accept the offer of a study place in the Republic has fallen significantly over the last five years. Without effective cross-border cooperation and communication by the respective Departments of Education, and a commitment to reforming Leaving Certificate examinations and results timeframes, any real progress in encouraging students to cross the border – in either direction - will remain hampered.

6. Another obstacle is the acute accommodation shortage, exacerbated by the high cost of this and the general high cost of living. Given that a significant proportion of students from Northern Ireland studying in the Republic are based in urban areas, where these costs are highest, potential student enrolments in our universities from Northern Ireland will undoubtedly continue to suffer. While additional capital investment is slowly being provided to support universities to increase student accommodation, the non-aligned Leaving Certificate timelines means that NI students have to wait until the very last minute before seeking to secure this accommodation.
7. In contrast, the overall numbers of students from the Republic studying in Northern Ireland have remained reasonably stable over the last eight years. According to the UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), these have fluctuated between 2350 and just under 2100 for each year over this period, with approximately half of these at postgraduate level. This reflects a more stable and somewhat lower cost environment and student housing market.
8. Strategic decision-making on cross-border enrolments has been hampered by the underinvestment in higher education over the last decade. While in 2022, Government committed to invest an additional €307 million annually to bring HE funding back up to the level required for a globally competitive, knowledge-based economy, only one third of this amount has materialised over the two budgets since then. This chronic long-term under-investment undermines capacity to engage with specific target cohorts of potential applicants such as students in Northern Ireland and their schools, where a long-term programme of awareness raising and relationship building is required if we are to attract significant numbers of students. There would be considerable scope for strengthening 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, but this is cost intensive and would need to a longer-term approach to deliver results.
9. 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. While these numbers are small, this is an important area of focus post-Brexit, given the challenges for

colleagues in the north on research collaboration and funding, and in building all-island research communities and networks in key areas of societal challenge.

10. In conclusion, for North-South enrolments to improve:

- A. The delayed timelines for Leaving Certificate results must be addressed urgently.
- B. 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.
- C. System-level awareness raising and relationship building is required to support greater student mobility in both directions.
- D. The Shared Island research programme should be expanded with further post-graduate places for NI students.

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 – 2023

Students with NI addresses:	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	1905	21%	1104	26%	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%	219	-11%	29%	15%
2023	1216	-14%	672	-11%	55%	200	-9%	30%	16%

All data provided by and with permission of CAO.