



Cross-border Student Mobility in Third Level Education: An Update

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The movement of higher education students, staff, and research funding between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland has been a focus of increasing political and academic interest throughout the period following the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) in 1998. Cross-border student mobility in particular, is widely recognized as offering mutual economic, social and cultural benefits to those jurisdictions that enable it. Indeed, the Centre for Cross Border Studies (CCBS) has previously published a number of reports and briefing papers on cross-border mobility in third level education, as have other higher education institutions and authorities on the island¹.

However, as with all areas of public policy, it is vital to assess the causes, and consequences of, any changes or developments². We feel, therefore, that the present dynamic and uncertain context of the United Kingdom's (UK) exit from the European Union (EU) compels further examination of this issue. There is a need to understand the immediate and longer-term impact of Brexit on student mobility, particularly in order to boost the capacity of institutions north and south to accommodate any shifts, and to deliver services in higher education effectively.

¹ See for instance: Haverty, T. and Soares, A. (2014) "Cross-border Mobility in Third Level Education, CCBS briefing paper; Haverty, T. (2014) "Improving Cross-border Access to Third-Level Education. Alternative Qualifications as Barriers to Mobility", <http://borderpeople.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Education-BriefingPaper.pdf>; Joint Report by the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education and Skills (2015) 'An Analysis of Existing Statistics on Student Flows Between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in Higher Education and Further Education', <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/Joint-Research-Report-on-Student-Flows.pdf>; EURES Cross-border Partnership (2011) "A study of obstacles to cross-border undergraduate education". The Report is based on research undertaken at the request of the IBEC-CBI Joint Business Council (JBC), and was conducted by the CCBS director Andy Pollak, <http://www.crossborder.ie/pubs/undergraduate-study-2011.pdf>

² As suggested in McTaggart, M. (2015) 'An analysis of the Joint Report by the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education and Skills on Existing Statistics on Student Flows between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in Higher Education and Further Education', <http://crossborder.ie/>

Questions that arise in this context include:

- How will Brexit affect the levels and direction of existing student flows?
- Will it further underscore or counteract some of the traditionally existing opportunities and barriers to such flows?
- Will interest to safeguard and further develop cross-border student mobility continue among higher education (HE) authorities and institutions, particularly in the face of an economic logic driving efforts to attract international students from further afield?
- Finally, from a policy perspective, what is the best possible approach and what are the areas for future action, which will afford the safeguarding and further development of cross-border student mobility in tertiary education?

The present paper offers both an overview and an update of our previous publications on cross-border student mobility in tertiary education. It further extends this discussion to include consideration of the new socio-political and economic context provided by Brexit. In what follows, we first discuss the rationale behind efforts to encourage cross-border student mobility to date. Second, on the basis of the most up-to-date available statistics, we provide a brief summary of the state of cross-border student mobility in tertiary education between the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and Northern Ireland (NI). We then outline both 'traditional' and more recent factors influencing this mobility, and their likely effect in the immediate future. Finally, from a policy perspective, we elucidate a number of areas, and recommend steps for future action.

The significance of cross-border student mobility

Although the question of cross-border mobility in tertiary education has not been free from political controversy, it is generally recognized that this kind of mobility is an important aspect of both the development of the all-island economy and of the on-going peace process, and would result in a range of practical benefits for both jurisdictions³. Such a view, underscoring the importance of cross-border mobility, is accepted by governments on both sides of the border. The Higher Education Mobility Branch of the Department for the Economy (NI) currently states that

Higher education mobility is an area that is becoming increasingly important for the higher education sector in the context of a growing international labour market, the demand from employers for skills in operating in a global environment and increased competition for international students worldwide⁴.

³ See, for instance, North–South Parliamentary Association (2014) 'Access for students to third-level education in the respective jurisdictions (i.e. Northern Ireland and Ireland)' Briefing paper,

http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2014/north_south/13214.pdf

⁴ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/higher-education-mobility>

Indeed, Northern Ireland's Higher Education Strategy 'Graduating to Success' (2012)⁵ contains a section specifically devoted to facilitating cross border co-operation and student flows. Cross-border student mobility, it suggests, can improve the skill-base among NI graduates, drive the growth of the all-island economy, broaden the pool of graduates both north and south, and support the ongoing peace process. The economic potential of cross-border student mobility is emphasized, particularly in the context of attracting inward investment from international companies – an aspect of the NI Executive's aim to grow and re-balance the NI economy.

Support for cross-border student mobility is also evident in the 'National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030', published by the ROI Department of Education and Skills in 2011. The Strategy highlights the potential for collaboration across the higher education systems and institutions on a north-south basis that can advance cross-border regional development and Irish higher education on an all-island basis. Significantly, the Departments responsible for education each side of the border, agree that cross-border student mobility can also enhance cultural and political support for the ongoing peace process.

The Current Situation

As the preceding section suggests, the peace process developing over the past 20 years has arguably constituted a favourable context for unlocking the good potential for cross-border student mobility in third-level education on the island of Ireland. A common English-speaking academic culture and the geographical proximity of higher and further education institutions in the two jurisdictions have, in theory, made it possible and easier to acquire a first class international education while remaining close to home. Despite these favourable conditions, however, the level of 'cross-fertilisation in terms of education opportunity taking place between the two jurisdictions' is very limited⁶. The CCBS has previously suggested that 'at present, the number of students crossing the border to study at undergraduate level is low, with a general trend of decline both in the number of students from the Republic of Ireland travelling to Northern Ireland, and the number of Northern students travelling south'⁷.

As such, cross-border student mobility in tertiary education remains a part of a more general trend of underperformance of cross-border flows:

Cross-border flows are below their potential at present in terms of trade, commuting, business networks, access to public procurement, sales of design services, students and tourists, collaboration between research, technology and

⁵ Department for Employment and Learning (2012) 'Graduating for Success. A Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland', <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/del/graduating-to-success-he-strategy-for-ni.pdf>

⁶ EURES Cross-border Partnership (2011: 3) "A study of obstacles to cross-border undergraduate education", <http://www.crossborder.ie/pubs/undergraduate-study-2011.pdf>; Also see "The Case of Ireland-Northern Ireland (United Kingdom) – Regions and Innovation: Collaborating Across Borders", OECD Regional Development Working Papers, 2013/20, OECD Publishing; http://www.oecd.org/gov/regional-policy/The_case_of_Ireland-Northern-Ireland.pdf

⁷ Haverty, T and Soares, A. (2014: 1), See footnote 1.

development (RTD) centres and between these centres and industry (OECD, 2013: 196).

On the basis of findings published by both Departments responsible for education in ROI and NI, and by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland, as well as on statistical data acquired from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in the UK⁸, we can describe the current state of cross-border mobility in third-level education in Ireland/Northern Ireland as follows:

- NI domiciled students make up the largest proportion of students enrolled in NI Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This proportion has changed very little between 2013/14 and 2015/16 academic years, when it oscillated between 84.5% and 84.3% respectively. The proportion of ROI domiciled students enrolled in NI HEIs in the same period has also fluctuated only minimally, slightly decreasing from 4.6% in 2013/14 to 4.3% in 2015/16 (See Table 1). However, compared to 2008/09 academic year, when it stood at 6.7%, the percentage of ROI domiciled students has declined more significantly as a proportion of all NI enrolments. The longer term trend, therefore, continues to be one of proportionately declining south-to-north cross-border student mobility at HE level.

Table 1: The number of students at HE providers in Northern Ireland by Domicile

Domicile	Academic year					
	2015/16		2014/15		2013/14	
	Numbers	Percentage	Numbers	Percentage	Numbers	Percentage
Northern Ireland	43415	84.3	44295	84.1	44140	84.5
Other UK	2932	5.7	2826	5.4	2169	4.1
Ireland	2197	4.3	2345	4.5	2418	4.6
Other Domicile	2962	5.7	3182	6	3532	6.8
Total	51506	100	52648	100	52259	100

Source: HESA Student Record 2013/14-2015/16

- In 2015/16 the percentage of ‘other UK students’ of all enrolled in NI HE institutions stood at 5.7%. Compared to 2013/2014, when their proportion was 4.2%, this is the most significant single-group increase of non-NI domiciled students in NI HEIs. By contrast, the

⁸ See Joint Report by the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education and Skills (2015) ‘An Analysis of Existing Statistics on Student Flows Between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in Higher Education and Further Education’, <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Education-Reports/Joint-Research-Report-on-Student-Flows.pdf>; HEA (2016) ‘Brexit and Irish Higher Education and Research: Challenges and Opportunities’, <http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/Brexit-And-Irish-Higher-Education-And-Research-Challenges-And-Opportunities.pdf>

proportion of ‘other domicile’ students (international and EU) has decreased in the same period by slightly over 1%.

- The numbers of ROI domiciled students in NI HEIs are roughly evenly split between postgraduate and undergraduate levels of study. Data for 2015/16 academic year shows a slight increase in the proportion of undergraduates over that of postgraduates (51.7% over 48.3%). This inverts the slight predominance of postgraduates (50.2%) in 2013/14 academic year (see Table 2).

Table 2: The number of students domiciled from Ireland at HE providers in Northern Ireland by Level of Study

Academic year	Level of study				
	Postgraduate		Undergraduate		Total
	N	%	N	%	
2015/16	1061	48.3	1136	51.7	2197
2014/15	1160	49.5	1185	50.5	2345
2013/14	1215	50.2	1203	49.8	2418

Source: HESA Student Record 2013/14-2015/16

- In a manner analogous to the predominance of Northern Ireland students in NI HEIs, ROI domiciled students make up the largest cohort of students enrolled in ROI HEIs. Their proportion has increased from 91.3% in 2008/09 to 94% in 2015/16⁹, indicating a clear tendency among this group, over and above students from either UK or NI, to study ‘at home’.
- The number of students enrolling from NI in ROI HEIs is low. According to figures released by the Department for the Economy (DfE, NI)¹⁰, this number fluctuated only slightly as a proportion of all NI domiciled students enrolled on Higher Education courses in both the UK and the ROI in the period of 2013/14 to 2015/16. In 2013/14 and 2014/15 this proportion stood at 1.4% (n=1,035 out of 77,165 and n=1,075 out of 76,780 respectively). In 2015/16 there were 1,200 NI students enrolled in ROI HEIs which constituted 1.6% of all such students in the UK and ROI together. According to the HEA, in the 2016/17 academic year there were only 791 full-time NI students studying at ROI HEIs (just 0.4% of all enrolments in

⁹ Note on the comparability of figures: The 94% refers to all fulltime undergraduate new entrants in 2015/16, as published by HEA (2017) ‘Key facts and Figures: 2015/16’, <http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/HEA-Key-Facts-and-Figures-201516.pdf>

¹⁰ Department for the Economy (2017) Statistical factsheet 8 ‘Northern Ireland domiciled students enrolled on Higher Education courses in the UK and Republic of Ireland – 2011/12 to 2015/16’, <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/HE-Statistical-Factsheet-8-Total-NI-dom-HE-enrolments.pdf>

those institutions)¹¹. In the same year nearly three times as many ROI undergraduate and research students (n=2,000) were enrolled in NI HE institutions¹².

- Over two-thirds (72.5%) of undergraduate enrolments in NI institutions from the ROI were studying full-time in 2015/16, with 27.5% enrolled part-time (see Table 3). Data since 2008/09¹³ suggests that this is an inversion of a trend visible between 2008/09 and 2011/12 of gradual increase of the proportion of part-time undergraduates among ROI students in NI HEIs. In fact, ‘Between 2009/10 and 2011/12 there were more ROI domiciled students enrolling on part-time courses in NI HEIs than enrolling on full-time courses’¹⁴. CCBS does not have comparable recent figures for undergraduate enrollments of NI students in ROI HEIs. However, a joint DEL/DES¹⁵ Report published in 2015 suggests that in 2012/2013 among NI undergraduate students studying in the ROI, 86.8% were full-time, and that the preference to full-time studies among this group has been a stable trend.

Table 3: The number of undergraduate students domiciled from Ireland at HE providers in Northern Ireland (2013/14 -2015/16) by Mode of Study

Academic year	Mode of Study				
	Full-time		Part-time		Total
	N	%	N	%	
2015/16	824	72.5	312	27.5	1136
2014/15	870	73.4	315	26.6	1185
2013/14	860	71.5	343	28.5	1203

Source: HESA Student Record 2013/14-2015/16

- The most popular subject areas among ROI undergraduate students studying in NI in 2012/13 were ‘Business & Administrative Studies’ (25.8%) and ‘Subjects Allied to Medicine’ (22.3%), together constituting 41% of all such enrollments. No single other subject area attracted a double-figure proportion of Irish undergraduates, with ‘Biological Sciences’ following distantly with 8.3% and ‘Languages’ - with 6.2%¹⁶.
- At the same time, ‘Medicine & Dentistry’ was the most popular subject for NI domiciled undergraduates at ROI HEIs (12.7%) in 2012/13. This popularity was closely followed by enrollments in ‘Business & Administrative Studies’ (11.0%), ‘Law’ (10.7%) and ‘Creative Arts & Design’ (9.8%), all in the same academic year¹⁷.

¹¹ Source: HEA (2016) ‘Brexit and Irish Higher Education and Research: Challenges and Opportunities’, <http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/Brexit-And-Irish-Higher-Education-And-Research-Challenges-And-Opportunities.pdf>

¹² Ibid, p. 9 and 10. It is unclear, however, whether this latter number refers to full-time students only.

¹³ DES/DEL Joint report (2015 : 36). For a full reference see footnote 8.

¹⁴ Ibid: 36.

¹⁵ Full source listed in footnote 8.

¹⁶ DEL/DES Joint report (2015: 40).

¹⁷Ibid : 42.

- In 2012/13 over three quarters (79.4%) of all ROI undergraduates in NI and over half (60.1%) of postgraduates studied at Ulster University (UU). For NI students studying in ROI there has been greater variation. In the same year, 63.5% of undergraduates and 61.8% of postgraduates were studying at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and University College Dublin (UCD)¹⁸.
- Respectively, the proportion of NI students studying in the ROI Institutes of Technology has gradually increased from 10.8% to 23.0% in the period of 2008/09 and 2012/13, with 89.3% of those studying at the ‘border counties’ Institutes of Sligo, Dundalk and Letterkenny¹⁹. Interviews with admissions and career advice staff from ITs in the border region²⁰ suggest a continuation of the trend of small but steady increase in the proportion of NI students enrolling in these institutions over the period since.

Cross-border student mobility in third level education: Obstacles and Opportunities

A report prepared by CCBS in 2011²¹ identified and examined the main ‘traditional’ obstacles to undergraduate student mobility between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. These included, though were not restricted to, the following:

- Lack of information about higher (e.g. universities) and further education institutions (e.g. Further Education Colleges in the north and Institutes of Technology in the south) among potential students from the other side of the border;
- Tuition fees- and cost of living differentials (e.g. the high cost of living in Dublin);
- The change in equivalences between A level and Leaving Certificate grades in 2005 (e.g. some high demand courses in ROI, such as Medicine and Law, have required 4 A levels as opposed to only 3 A levels required by comparable courses in the UK);
- Lack of familiarity with the higher education admission system on the other side of the border. (Respectively, the Central Applications Office (CAO) process in Ireland, and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) in Northern Ireland);
- Lack of familiarity with financial assistance available in the other jurisdiction, and with its transferability across the border;
- Different perceptions and fears regarding cultural context, particularly concerns about sectarianism in NI, among students from Ireland;
- Lack of either unilateral or bilaterally coordinated government strategy for increasing the levels of cross-border student mobility, particularly given their sub-optimal state.

We discuss some of the above challenges, and the expected influence of Brexit on them, in greater detail below. Beyond this, however, it is also important to take into account the wider

¹⁸ Ibid: 42.

¹⁹ Ibid: 42.

²⁰ Dundalk IT, Interview with School Liaison, Aug 17th, 2017.

²¹ EURES Cross-border Partnership (2011) “A study of obstacles to cross-border undergraduate education”. The Report is based on research undertaken at the request of the IBEC-CBI Joint Business Council (JBC), and was conducted by the CCBS director Andy Pollak, <http://www.crossborder.ie/pubs/undergraduate-study-2011.pdf>

political and economic climate which bears upon the ability of higher education institutions on the island to further increase north-south cross-border student mobility. In a neoliberal economic climate, it is increasingly difficult for such institutions, whose government funding is ever more restricted, and often made correspondent to undergraduate student quotas, to ignore market economics. University recruitment and marketing strategies on both sides of the border are, therefore, often focused on optimizing outside sources of earning, such as international (non-EU) and (in the case of Northern Ireland) GB-students who are required to pay higher tuition fees²². This underlying context fundamentally conditions the challenges and opportunities for the development of cross-border co-operation in higher education on the island of Ireland.

Fees

Differences and changes in tuition fees

In 2017/2018 academic year NI-domiciled undergraduate students enrolling in NI HE institutions will pay an annual tuition fee of £4,030 for full-time programmes. The same fee applies to ROI-domiciled students as well as for other non-UK EU-domiciled students. For GB-domiciled students the respective fee is £9,250 per annum. Separate, higher fees apply to non-EU students²³.

By contrast, since 1997 Ireland has operated a 'free fees' policy for full-time undergraduate students. Most undergraduates attending publicly funded third-level courses do not have to pay tuition fees. Instead, those institutions charge an annual student contribution, also known as a registration fee. The student contribution rate in Ireland, for the 2017/18 academic year, is €3,000 and applies to UK (including NI) students²⁴.

As discussed in previous reports²⁵, the abolition of student fees in ROI in 1997 created a significant incentive for ROI students to remain within their own jurisdiction for third level study. Today, as well as paying tuition fees which are significantly higher than those charged by institutions in the Republic of Ireland, ROI students who may wish to study in NI are additionally ineligible for the range of loans and bursaries which are available to Northern Ireland students for the payment of living expenses²⁶.

It may be surprising to note, however, that the introduction of reduced fees in the Republic of Ireland appears not to have had an appreciable effect on the number of Northern Ireland students studying in the south. This begs the question of how important a factor is the cost of

²² Who pay higher contribution fees.

²³ Source: <https://www.qub.ac.uk/Study/PostgraduateStudy/TuitionFees/>

²⁴ Source: <http://hea.ie/funding-governance-performance/funding/student-finance/course-fees/>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Re the difference in tuition fees/fee contributions in the two jurisdictions see North–South Parliamentary Association (2014: 12) 'Access for students to third-level education in the respective jurisdictions (i.e. Northern Ireland and Ireland)' Briefing paper, http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2014/north_south/13214.pdf –

study in influencing decisions to embark on the path of cross-border education. Overall, both previous and recent research conducted by CCBS has indicated that in the higher education marketplace the primary factor determining a student's choice is the nature of the course, with the financial cost of that course as the next most important factor. This conclusion is supported by academic research^{27, 28} which measures the effects of the variation and rise of tuition fees in UK universities from 2012 on student mobility, and finds 'little evidence to support the notion that student mobility is driven by economic 'rationality'²⁹.

The effect of tuition fees on student mobility: What does academic research say?

Wakeling and Jefferies' research (2013) supports the notion that the cost of education is not the primary factor determining student mobility. The number of Northern Ireland domiciled students studying in Scotland, for instance, despite a lower tuition cost there after 2005, has declined, while increasing in English institutions in the same period. Moreover, the number of NI students moving to study in the ROI, despite the lower cost of study there and its geographical proximity, is substantially lower than those studying in Great Britain. At the same time, students from the Republic of Ireland, it is noted, appear to have acted in a more straightforward economically rational manner, since their numbers in England and Northern Ireland, after the introduction of £3000 annual 'top-up' fees from 2006, has dropped. An exception is Scotland, where enrolment became free to students from the ROI after 2007 but where enrolment numbers from this group have remained static.

Thus the results of the Wakeling and Jefferies study yield both 'intriguing' and 'conflicting results' (2013: 508). Only 'students from the Republic of Ireland show student mobility patterns consistent with an economically 'rational' reaction to tuition fee changes' (ibid). Both English and Northern Ireland-domiciled students have stayed increasingly in-country, ostensibly behaving contrary to economic self-interest (rather than going to Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, where tuition fees are substantially lower). However, 'in Northern Ireland the capacity for students to stay home is limited by the supply of degree-level places, which is considerably below the manifest demand for higher education in-country' (ibid).

Such research suggests that while higher fees abroad may serve as a deterrent of cross-border student mobility, there is a limit to such a deterrent. Other, favourable to the decision to study abroad factors include: the 'pull' of particular education institutions, rather than of a country as a whole; the existence of 'well-worn paths' for study abroad, 'in patterns that exhibit little change over time, almost regardless of changes to student funding'; and the variability of 'mental borders' between countries. In this respect, the Irish land border is found to be 'quite

²⁷ Wakeling and Jefferies (2013) 'The effect of tuition fees on student mobility: the UK and Ireland as a natural experiment, *British Educational Research Journal* Vol. 39, No. 3, pp. 491–513.

²⁸ The authors researched entrants ordinarily domiciled in the devolved regions of the UK and in the Republic of Ireland to first-degree programmes at UCAS institutions in the years 2000–2010 (Though data for the ROI was only available for the period between 2004 and 2009).

²⁹ Ibid: 491.

strong' and 'stronger in the North than in the Republic'³⁰. It is suggested, therefore, that the overall effect of economic rationality on student mobility will depend strongly on its interference with factors such as: the capacity of home institutions to absorb student numbers, established cultural and wider societal factors shaping both perceptions of particular institutions, and traditions/paths for study abroad or at home, the degree and quality of outreach and information dissemination that individual HEI engage in, and the degree of available funding and bursary support.

Managing the capacity of HEIs in Northern Ireland: Influence on recruiting ROI-domiciled students

At present, the higher education system's capacity in Northern Ireland is managed through the maximum student number (MaSN) control mechanism, under which the number of full-time undergraduate students at each institution is restricted. This means that universities are funded by local Government according to a predetermined quota (cap) on the number of Northern Ireland- and EU-domiciled undergraduate students in them. The purpose of the MaSN cap is to contain the expenditure associated with student support costs. It does not apply to part-time and postgraduate students, and only applies to Northern Ireland universities and colleges. One of the disadvantages of this system, from a HEIs' perspective, is that it offers little flexibility to respond to changes in demand.

The above explains the recruitment strategy of HEIs in Northern Ireland, such as Queen's University Belfast (QUB)³¹. In their approach to ROI student recruitment and outreach, the QUB make a key distinction between undergraduate and post-graduate students. The former (who fall under the above described MaSN cap) are not currently targeted for recruitment, while the latter (who fall outside the MaSN cap) are a 'key marketing and strategic target'³². This is because in government subsidy terms, ROI undergraduate students in NI are valued equally to NI undergraduate students. From the perspective of the university it is, therefore, easier to fill its own capacity with local NI students, since this requires less effort for the same financial return.

Funding Support

Numerous student assistance schemes in both Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland exist, albeit frequent changes apply to most.

³⁰ Ibid: 509.

³¹ For the purposes of this paper we conducted a limited number of 'key-informant' interviews with student recruitment/liason officers from each north and south universities and from Institutes of Technology. These interviews are by no mean representative of the general population of higher and further education institutions on the island. Their purpose was to allow us to pick upon some of the main issues arising for such institutions' ability to develop cross-border student mobility, in the context of Brexit.

³² Interview with student recruitment, QUB, 31/08/2017.

In Northern Ireland such financial support includes tuition fee loans, as well as professional career development loans at a postgraduate level. Students ordinarily domiciled in the ROI can apply for such loans from NI Student Finance (a Northern Ireland funding body), without being required to have resided in the north. However, this lack of residency requirement may well change after Brexit comes into effect.

In addition, postgraduate studentships, sponsored by The Department for the Economy (DfE), are available for study at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and Ulster University (UU). These are subject to citizenship and residency requirements. For UK domiciled students the value of an award includes the cost of approved fees as well as maintenance support³³. Students from European Union countries (including ROI) may be eligible to get their fees paid but are not eligible for maintenance support. There is also a limited number of Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs postgraduate studentships, offered each year for a three-year period of PhD research at either a University in the United Kingdom (UK) or in the Republic of Ireland (ROI). Again, however, a three-year residency in Northern Ireland rule applies, and EU nationals qualify for a “fees only” award.

Among the number of international HE programmes and scholarships that the HE Mobility Branch of the DfE currently manages and/or (co)funds, no specialized programme or scholarship for a full-time undergraduate degree course in Ireland is available.

Student funding in the Republic of Ireland is made available through the Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) System. This includes funding for Post Leaving Certificate Courses (PLC) for further education Levels 5 and 6, funding for undergraduate and postgraduate university students, and for student studying outside the state. Applicants must answer to nationality and residency requirements (i.e. be Irish, EU, EEA or Swiss National or have specific leave to remain in the State; and be ordinarily resident in Ireland, the EU, EEA or Switzerland for 3 of the last 5 years), and the size of funding awards depends on level of income. For students studying outside Ireland funding is available for full-time undergraduate study only (for enrolling on full-time courses in another EU member state). Postgraduate funding support for study abroad is available only for courses in approved institutions in NI, including QUB, UU, St. Mary's College of Education and Stranmillis College.

In addition, partial bursaries are also available. Each year, *Universities Ireland* offers four scholarships, each worth €15,000, to students who have been accepted to undertake a recognised Master's Degree or are entering the first year of a PhD programme at a university in the island of Ireland that is not in the same jurisdiction as the university where they have previously studied.

³³ In academic year 2017-2018 the basic rate of maintenance support for a Research Studentship is €14,553, while the basic rate of maintenance support for a Taught Studentship is £7,277.

Our interview with the school liaison from the Dundalk Institute of Technology in the ROI³⁴, suggests that in this case at least potential students continue to be uninformed about the transferability of undergraduate tuition fee loans north to south, and of SUSI-supported funding south to north. Clearly also, there is, at present, a wide-spread degree of uncertainty regarding the changes to the above-described forms and sources of undergraduate and postgraduate funding that may take place after Brexit comes into effect in 2019. We return to discussing the effects of this uncertainty further below.

Differing Application Systems

Our previous report on the challenges and obstacles to cross-border student mobility³⁵ in tertiary education pointed out that the existence of two separate application systems (UCAS in the UK and CAO in the ROI respectively), had created difficulties for those considering study in the other jurisdiction. ‘The fact, for example, that UCAS applications require the inclusion of a detailed “personal statement” which is absent from the CAO process can prove daunting to prospective ROI applicants, particularly when school staff can be unfamiliar with the process’³⁶. In the opinion of one of our interviewees, while the above remains largely the case, differing application systems can be described as an inconvenience, and a subject of misconception, rather than as a ‘hard’ obstacle to cross-border student mobility.

Differing Qualification Systems

The comparability of the principal school-leaving qualifications in the two jurisdictions (A-Levels in Northern Ireland and the Leaving Certificate in the Republic of Ireland) continues to be a source of difficulty, particularly for those wishing to study at a further education institution in the other jurisdiction. As previously suggested, the requirement among many ROI institutions for 4 A-levels when applying for some high-demand courses (given that offers by UK universities are largely based on the attainment of 3 A-Levels) is perceived by some northern students as a barrier to study in the Republic³⁷.

In an attempt to alleviate some of the above-described difficulties, in the past a number of border-region further education institutions in both jurisdictions have signed agreements for the mutual recognition of alternative qualifications³⁸. Our interviews with the school liaison officer from Dundalk IT and with the Dean for Undergraduate Studies at Trinity College Dublin,

³⁴ Date of interview: August 17th 2017

³⁵ Soares, A. and Haverty, T. (2014). For the full reference see footnote 1.

³⁶ Ibid: 5.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ For instance, Haverty, T. (2014) points out that an agreement had been signed between the North West Regional College, a further education college in county Derry/Londonderry, and a number of Southern institutes of technology. For a full reference see footnote 1.

suggested that in the ROI steps continue to be taken towards widening recognition of degrees from the other jurisdiction (see text box below)³⁹.

New Admissions Criteria for Northern Ireland Students Adopted by Irish Universities

Since 2015 Trinity College Dublin have run a feasibility scheme, with the aim of increasing the number of students from Northern Ireland. Similar pilot schemes have now been run by Dublin City University, and NUI Galway while, as recommended by the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the scheme is set to be adopted by all seven Irish universities, and will apply to all A-level students across the EU. The scheme includes a new set of admissions criteria that soften the thus-far restrictive grade conversion rules. Accordingly, applicants starting university in September 2016 have benefitted from up to 30 additional points per grade band (resulting in a maximum of 570 points, as opposed to 515 points previously)⁴⁰. Trinity's own initiative - a feasibility study for Northern Ireland - has involved reserving places for NI applicants in most courses (with the exception of medicine) and allowing 3 A-levels for admission⁴¹. In 2016/2017 academic year TCD saw a 22% increase of applications from Northern Ireland. However, the conversion of offers into acceptances among this group of students remains markedly lower than that of Irish students, and has stood at 39% across the last few academic years⁴².

Unlike the revision of admissions criteria for Northern Ireland students, adopted by Irish universities in recent years (which has included lowering their entry requirements for the necessary number of A-levels held by students from the UK) a re-examination of how the Irish Leaving Certificate is weighed in the application process at Northern Ireland HEIs has not taken place. This, in the opinion of our interviewee from Queen's University Belfast⁴³, is largely due to the fact the ROI undergraduate students are, as a group, not targeted for recruitment by NI HEIs, for the reasons outlined in the 'fees' section of this paper. Provided that, after Brexit, ROI students fall outside the MaSN cap, while the fees they are charged remain reasonably competitive, an incentive may be created for NI universities to more actively recruit southern undergraduates and, as a part of that, to re-examine the weight given to the Irish Leaving Certificate.

³⁹ For instance, Dundalk IT have shown flexibility by developing their own scoring system that gives A-levels a greater weight, e.g. a value of 120 points instead of 100 as is customary in the Irish higher and further education system; They have further eased entry requirements by accepting a combination of B-tech and A-level qualifications, and for nursing courses – will accept, from 2018, both science and further science GCSEs. Source: Interview, August 17th, 2017.

⁴⁰ Source: <http://www.universitytimes.ie/2015/03/irish-universities-to-adopt-new-admissions-criteria-for-northern-ireland-applicants/>

⁴¹ Source: Interview with the Dean for Undergraduate Studies, TCD, 07/09/2017; TCD Provost speech, <https://www.tcd.ie/provost/addresses/2015-05-12-tcd-ni-assoc-belfast.php>

⁴² Interview with the Dean for Undergraduate Studies, TCD, September 6th, 2017.

⁴³ QUB student recruitment, interview on August 31st, 2017.

Capacity of HEIs and Demographics

As previously pointed out⁴⁴, the Central Statistics Office (CSO, ROI) has projected an increase in the number of 18-21 year olds in the ROI from 215,977 to 292,096, in the period between 2016 and 2031. Therefore, an overall increase in the demand for HEI places in Ireland is expected for the period 2014 – 2028. At the same time, the Northern Ireland university system will face the challenge of the number of 18 year-olds falling by around 15% over the next 10 years⁴⁵. It is expected that this will impact on undergraduate numbers and university finance.

Questions therefore arise, regarding the opportunities and challenges for cross-border student mobility in a context where the Republic of Ireland faces high undergraduate demand and not enough higher education places, whilst Northern Ireland HEIs may operate at spare capacity. Moreover, how (if at all) might Brexit further influence such a situation? On the one hand, the popularity of Irish HEIs among international and EU students is projected to rise as uncertainty around fees, immigration status, and eligibility for funding support is expected to 'divert' such students from UK HEIs. This may exacerbate the capacity deficit among southern HEIs. The manner of dealing with such a deficit will depend on the flexibility of education institutions and authorities in the ROI, as well as on how government-led education strategies and policies respond to this challenge.

On another hand, the ability of HEIs in Northern Ireland to counteract the potential flow away of international, Irish, and other EU students will depend on the particular outcomes of Brexit negotiations for questions such as citizens' rights, freedom of mobility, and the Irish land border. It will also depend on the existing strategy of individual HEIs for retaining and further developing established pathways for UK, international, EU, and Ireland/Northern Ireland cross-border student mobility. It is difficult to gauge at present whether Irish students not 'absorbed' by HEIs in Ireland, for instance, might be 'pulled' to study in Northern Ireland under conditions more favourable than those in the rest of the UK or Europe.

Strategies for cross-border student mobility in the context of Brexit?

In the light of the above discussion, how do education authorities on either side of the border approach both the challenges and opportunities that Brexit brings to cross-border student mobility on the island of Ireland? Again, the first thing to note in this respect, is that this question remains conditional upon the outcome of Brexit negotiations. However, education authorities and higher education institutions in the UK, Ireland and in Northern Ireland have published a series of position papers detailing their priorities and concerns over the effects of Brexit on third level education. These documents suggest that the specific to Ireland/Northern Ireland cross-border student mobility in third-level education is a matter of concern not so

⁴⁴ EURES Cross-border Partnership (2011). See full reference in footnote 1.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

much by itself, as it is within the broader context of safeguarding EU and international student mobility.

The United Kingdom

In the UK, there are signs that universities and other further and higher education institutions see Brexit not simply as a challenge but also as an opportunity “to build some serious global business” on the basis of their reputation and to try to “distance [or] reduce the impact of domestic politics [or] political decisions on them”⁴⁶. A House of Commons Education Committee Report, published in April 2017, identifies ‘a risk that Brexit will damage the international competitiveness and long-term success of [UK] universities’⁴⁷ and suggests a number of areas of concern:

- **Threat to regional market and connections:** In 2015–16, 5.6% of students at UK universities, were from the EU (and 13.6% were from non-EU countries). Figures from the EC from 2014 suggest that the UK is currently the most popular destination for students from the European Economic Area (and candidate countries) wanting to study abroad. At the same time, a report by London Economics [has] concluded ‘that the removal of tuition fee support would likely cause demand from EU students to decline by potentially as much as 57%’⁴⁸. There is a concern, therefore, with averting a potential flow away from UK universities of both or either international and/or EU students.
- **Freedom of movement:** The existing strong ties between the higher education sector in the UK and in the EU have, thus far, been facilitated by the free movement of students from the EU, and vice versa. The continuation of those relationships is, therefore, directly dependent on future migration policy. It is recommended in this respect that Government should strive to retain a reciprocal open approach in negotiating mobility rights (such as visa-free access), to enable the preservation of a system as closely resembling freedom of movement as possible. A similarly open approach is recommended with respect to all international students, in order to retain UK’s position as a global leader in higher education (Paragraph 21).
- **Eligibility and financial support rights:** As EU nationals studying in the UK have, at present, the same rights as home students, including that of paying home-rate fees⁴⁹ and being eligible for tuition fee loans, it is recommended that Government guarantees the continuation of these rights for, and beyond, 2018/19 academic year. It is hoped that such guarantees ‘will create some immediate stability during the [Brexit] negotiations’ (Paragraph 19).

⁴⁶ See <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/brexit-strategies-how-universities-might-shape-their-futures#survey-answer>

⁴⁷ House of Commons (HoC) Education Committee (2017) ‘Ninth Report of Session 2016–17’, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmeduc/683/683.pdf>, p. 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid: 8 – 9.

⁴⁹Up to the maximum of £9,250 per year.

- **Uncertainty:** The existing high degree of uncertainty surrounding the consequences of Brexit for higher education is in itself a factor threatening the flow of EU and international students to the UK. Therefore, it is important that the higher education sector is given enough of an advance notice of any changes to the migration status of EU students, their fee rate and access to loans, to enable the sector to adjust and plan ahead (Paragraph 20).

Northern Ireland

As previously noted, the question of further increasing the existing level of cross-border student mobility on the island of Ireland, within and without the context of Brexit, has so far been dominated by strategies for internationalization in the context of a much wider, global competition for international students. In this sense, the update of the NI Strategy for Higher Education – ‘Graduating to Success’ (2015) – commits to establishing, by 2020, a significant increase in inward and outward international mobility, moving towards a doubling of activity compared with the 2010 baseline. In the absence of a functioning devolved administration, however, no further position papers addressing the challenges that Brexit brings along for higher education in Northern Ireland, have been published by education authorities in the devolved region. The Minister for Education, Peter Weir MLA, while announcing that the Department of Education has ‘set up a team at a “senior level” to consider the implications, challenges and opportunities of Brexit for the Department’s functions,⁵⁰ has also added that ‘Until ... a withdrawal agreement ...is negotiated and takes effect’ he ‘will not be in a position to fully assess the implications’⁵¹.

At the same time, individual HEIs in Northern Ireland have published position papers expressing concerns and recommendations for future actions. Both Queen’s University Belfast’s (QUB) and University of Ulster’s position/briefing papers mirror the general concern with the barriers to future mobility of international and EU students and staff, as well as to attracting EU funding, articulated in the House of Commons Education Committee Report. QUB identifies four key issues that must be satisfactorily addressed in the exit negotiations to support the University in contributing to the NI economy. These include: access to EU Research Funding; the status of Current and Future EU Staff; Student Recruitment and Mobility; and Relationship with the Republic of Ireland (ROI). It is the latter among these that highlights the question of cross-border mobility in higher education, albeit doing so through the lens of a concern with maintaining access to cross-border research and collaborative funding programmes, and the associated freedom of mobility for EU researchers and staff.

⁵⁰ As reported in the North/South Inter-Parliamentary Association’s Briefing Paper 1 ‘The Impact of Brexit on Cross-border Activity’, <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2016-2021/2016/northsouth/8816.pdf>

⁵¹ Ibid, 86.

Similarly, and as a matter of immediate priority, the University of Ulster⁵² urge government to take steps to: provide reassurances about the immigration status of existing EU students and staff; ensure that future academic and student mobility is not impeded by unnecessary bureaucracy, regardless of the immigration status of EU nationals; and provide clarification regarding EU students' access to tuition fee loans for 2017–18, among others. It is suggested in this respect that

The Republic of Ireland provides Ulster University with our largest cohort of fee-paying EU students studying at the institution. We also have strong cross-border connections ranging from the development and delivery of course provision through to research partnerships with University College Dublin and Dublin City University in key areas including connected health technology and public health⁵³.

Ireland

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland⁵⁴ understands higher education and research as a key component of Ireland's Brexit strategy. As a part of that, student mobility is seen as a main area likely to be impacted by Brexit, and here the associated big questions of citizens' rights (linked to residency rules, healthcare, finding/fees and freedom of mobility) are also recognized as central.

The HEA position paper demonstrates a clear consciousness and a vested interest among education authorities in Ireland, in becoming 'a talent magnet, attracting the best students, academics and researchers'⁵⁵. As such it is recommended that Irish HEIs 'attract and support all international students, staff and researchers seeking to re-locate to Ireland'⁵⁶. From the perspective of safeguarding and encouraging the future development of cross-border student flows between Ireland and Northern Ireland, such a position is broadly reassuring. However, this will depend on the status agreed upon for Northern Ireland students, after Brexit. Whether or not students ordinarily domiciled in Northern Ireland, can enjoy a continuation of EU student rights in Ireland after Brexit, is again a question that depends upon the outcome of Brexit negotiations, particularly concerning the relationship between Ireland and the UK, and the future of the Irish border. It is unclear from the recently published UK position paper on this

⁵² University of Ulster (2016) 'BREXIT and the implications for Ulster University', Briefing paper, https://www.ulster.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/169969/brexit-and-the-implications-for-ulster-university.pdf

⁵³ Ibid: 4.

⁵⁴ HEA (2016) 'Brexit and Irish Higher Education and Research: Challenges and Opportunities', <http://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2017/06/Brexit-And-Irish-Higher-Education-And-Research-Challenges-And-Opportunities.pdf>

⁵⁵ Ibid: 5.

⁵⁶ Encouraging in this respect is the reported by Ned Costello, of the [Irish Universities Association](http://www.irishuniversitiesassociation.com) 17% increase in EU student applications to study in Ireland, suggesting that European students are already considering Ireland as an alternative destination to the UK (as reported by The Irish Times on March 21st, 2017, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/brexit-could-lead-to-increase-in-cao-points-for-irish-students-1.3019365>

matter, whether the commitment to uphold the rights of Irish citizens in the UK, under the terms of the Common Travel Area (CTA), and of Irish citizens in NI, under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), will extend to retaining the right to payment of home-rate tuition fees when studying in either jurisdiction. Undoubtedly, this issue also depends upon the preparedness of the UK Government to itself offer, as recommended by the above discussed HoC Report, a guarantee to EU students of the same rights as home students, including that of paying home-rate fees.

In light of this discussion, HEA recommends that the Irish government adopts ‘a supportive negotiating stance with respect to the future standing of UK higher education and research in post-Brexit Europe as it is in Ireland’s interest to maintain and/or strengthen such links and collaborations’⁵⁷. Specifically, protecting the historic and strong relationship with the UK is seen as a necessary step to facilitate academic and student mobility (and the need to negotiate around rules of residency, eligibility and fee reciprocity), as is maintaining ‘the soft border with Northern Ireland – to protect valuable cross-border flows of staff, students and collaboration’⁵⁸.

Ireland: Brexit and Challenges to Student Mobility (HEA position paper, 2016)

Tuition fees

- A ‘hard’ Brexit threatens the treatment of Irish and UK students in each other’s jurisdictions as ‘international students’;
- This means changes in residency requirements, in the ability to access EU-level tuition fees, student loan schemes, or student support programmes (e.g. disability);
- The variability of exchange rates could become another factor.
- The ability of the Irish state to maintain financial support for Irish students studying in the UK may also be affected.

Funding

- The transferability of the SUSI grant schemes from Ireland to the UK or NI will be affected as the latter jurisdictions will be outside the EU;
- The effects on the existing limited support available for Irish post-graduates wishing to study in Northern Ireland is unclear as yet.

HEIs Capacity

- If Irish students who previously chose to study in the UK decide to stay in Ireland, questions arise around the capacity (available places and facilities) of Irish HEIs to accommodate rising demand.

Migration policies

- There are many unknown issues around free movement which may impact on students and graduates;
- The ease of cross-border travel would be an important factor in cross-border student mobility.

⁵⁷ As in footnote 51, p. 4.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

Summary and Recommendations

- Cross-border student mobility in third level education in Ireland/Northern Ireland is valued for the wider range of choice in the content, type and quality of education, and for the experience that it can offer to individual students;
- Such an experience is itself seen as a form of both cultural and economic capital. It can contribute to the development of a sustained culture of cooperation at each personal, professional and geographic levels, and can contribute towards the creation of an all-Ireland job market and economy. Furthermore, cross-border student mobility is valued for enhancing the social sustainability of the peace process;
- However, the levels of such mobility in both directions, north and south of the Irish border, remain low;
- Previous research has identified a number of challenges and obstacles to increasing these suboptimal levels of cross-border student mobility, including differences in tuition fees and cost of living in the two jurisdictions, limited funding support, and differing qualification and application systems;
- A degree of cross-border cooperation in third-level education between individual education institutions and authorities does exist. For instance, some coordination and agreement in between HEIs and further education institutions (ITs in the south and FECs in the north) is focused on mutual recognition of qualifications. Additionally, as part of the implementation plan for the *Graduating to Success Higher Education Strategy* (DEL, 2012), a cross-border project team was established with two key objectives: supporting HEIs in identifying opportunities for north-south co-operation in teaching and learning; and assisting HEIs to meet established targets on increased cross-border student mobility by 2020. One result of this cooperation is the publishing of a regular joint Department of Education and Skills (ROI) and Department for Employment and Learning (NI) report on cross-border student flows. This helps inform policy developments and provision in both jurisdictions.
- Such ongoing work notwithstanding, the fact that higher education institutions in both the UK and the ROI have had to increasingly operate in a market-driven environment, shaped by a broad neo-liberal political and economic climate, has dictated that efforts are directed towards increasing the levels of international student mobility, above and beyond such local cross-border mobility. Simply put, overseas student mobility affords higher direct earnings to HEIs in both jurisdictions;
- Brexit presents both challenges and opportunities in front of the development of cross-border student mobility in third level education, on the island of Ireland. The main challenges are broadly linked to the wide-spread level of uncertainty among both higher and further education institutions each side of the border, and among prospective students, regarding the accessibility of third-level education in the other jurisdiction after 2019. These questions are linked directly to the outcome of Brexit negotiations on issues such as citizens' rights, freedom of mobility, the Irish border, and the UK's future relationship with the Republic of Ireland.

- UK higher education institutions, including the two universities in Northern Ireland, have lobbied for the immediate reduction of the uncertainty over EU students (and staff), including that: Government publishes immediately a contingency plan for higher education to prepare for a ‘no deal’ situation; guarantees that the 2018/19 student cohort will have the same fees and tuition loan access; and unilaterally guaranteeing the mobility and residence rights of EU students, before the end of 2017⁵⁹.
- More broadly, it has been argued that the UK immigration system after Brexit should cater more particularly for the needs of higher education, and should facilitate, rather than obstruct, the movement of people from and to UK universities by means, such as the reduction of bureaucracy, a visa-free regime for EU students, and the removal of overseas students from the net migration target⁶⁰.
- The above UK-wide and Brexit-associated challenges to cross-border student mobility notwithstanding, we reiterate our previous recommendation⁶¹ that traditional obstacles to the development of this kind of mobility on the island of Ireland require measures such as developing a more wide-spread and encompassing institutional collaboration, if not a joint strategy on a North-South basis. This would also require the joint commitment of Government resources.
- In this respect, we stress the continued validity of the findings and recommendations of the D’Arcy’s Report of 2012⁶². In order to better tackle the shared systemic challenges to third level education provision in each NI and the ROI, the Report recommended stepping up cross-border co-operation in this field, including through the combination of third level institutional resources to jointly deliver high quality courses.
- In the same vein, the Centre for Cross Border Studies have previously suggested⁶³ that the Higher Education sector’s approach to cross-border collaboration cannot be restricted to collaboration in research but must also include further opportunities for students from both jurisdictions to study in the other jurisdiction. This includes exploring opportunities for distinctive undergraduate and postgraduate courses offered on a joint basis by HEIs from each jurisdiction. Such courses could not only contribute to equipping students to work on an all-island basis, but could also be attractive to students from outside these jurisdictions.

⁵⁹ HoC (2017) Education Committee Report. For a full reference see footnote 44.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Haverty, T. and Soares, A. (2014) “Cross-border Mobility in Third Level Education, CCBS briefing paper; Haverty, T. (2014) “Improving Cross-border Access to Third-Level Education. Alternative Qualifications as Barriers to Mobility”, <http://borderpeople.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Education-BriefingPaper.pdf>

⁶²See Michael D’Arcy (2012) ‘Delivering a Prosperity Process: Opportunities in North/South Public Service Provision. A Scoping Study’, p. 30, <http://www.crossborder.ie/oldsite/wp-content/uploads/MichaelDarcyReport.pdf>

⁶³ Response to The Higher Education Consultation, conducted by the Department for Employment and Learning (NI), October 2015.