

Reflections on the provision of higher education through cross border partnerships

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Introduction

Numerous authors in this journal have highlighted the concept of cross-border mobility in higher education as an important aspect of both socio-economic development and of the ongoing peace process. Quigley proposed that there are significant possibilities for North-South synergy in such areas as health, higher education and research, energy, tourism and water.¹ Indeed, Soares explains that the societies of the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland are intimately connected.² Education and specifically, higher education are examples of this.

Although the nature and content of each territory's standard qualifications may differ, both support a model of higher education with comparable design and delivery. It is important to note that both are aligned to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). Therefore, Komarova reports that 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 in 1998.³ Cross-border student mobility in particular, is widely recognized as offering mutual economic, social and cultural benefits. Indeed, Osborne reflects that there has been substantial EU-funded cross-border activity in relation to education, involving early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary levels, as well as teacher education.⁴

The Economic and Social Value of Higher Education

The volume edited by Enders et al shows there is a substantial body of international evidence that demonstrates a measurable (beneficial) impact of investment in higher education.⁵ Furthermore, ideas and debates about how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can and should be involved in social change and economic growth have begun to appear more prominently in the literature.⁶ Many HEIs have experienced a paradigm shift towards knowledge transfer, innovation, and commercialization and other academic spin-outs. Such a shift has changed the nature and scope of academic activities within the HEIs, their public spheres; and communities generating significant value across multiple dimensions: financial, social, cultural and environmental.⁷ As both an economic and social entity, an HEI plays a vital role in anchoring investment and generating economic activity, jobs and contributing to the growing success of its region. Furthermore, HEIs vary substantially, in terms of scale, scope, and areas of specialization. HEIs are a major source of the skills and knowledge that drive growth and innovation in stimulating business creation and exploiting ideas in society.⁸ In the context of this paper there is also a vital role in supporting the peace process and sharing the broad benefits associated with higher education. The ability of educators, policymakers and business to persuade students of the value of higher education has significantly contributed to economic success and social progress. Guerrero *et al* explain that many evaluations do not capture the complexity and dynamic characteristics of the outcomes of higher education and their transformation into economic impacts.⁹ Therefore, in this paper we reflect in a broad sense on the value and contribution that collaborative cross border provision of higher education has had.

The Status of Cross Border Mobility

Ongoing work by the Centre for Cross Border Studies highlights a series of ongoing issues with the development of cross-border education:

- A general lack of information within schools regarding third level and further education options within the two jurisdictions.
- Unfamiliarity amongst students and institutions regarding the higher education application system (UCAS, CAO) used in the two jurisdictions.
- Persisting concerns with regard to the fairness of the methodology used to assess the value of school leaving qualifications (A-Levels, Leaving Cert.) from the alternate jurisdiction when dealing with cross-border applications.
- The differing student funding regimes in the two jurisdictions.

- A general lack of adequate recognition of alternative qualifications, such as HND, BTEC and QQI FET, for entry to higher education in the two jurisdictions.

There are many reasons for students to move from one jurisdiction to another and specifically, from the Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland, or vice versa, to undertake higher education. Two common reasons are to: 1) enhance access to a particular discipline at undergraduate level or 2) to access specialist postgraduate training. Ireland's Higher Education Authority and Northern Ireland's Department for the Economy reported that an average of over 1,000 NI students enrolled at ROI HEIs each year between 2011/12 and 2015/16, with 1,200 NI students enrolled in 2015/16 alone.¹⁰ NI students comprise a substantial component of the overall ROI HEI student population, particularly for HEIs such as Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, Dundalk IT and Letterkenny IT.

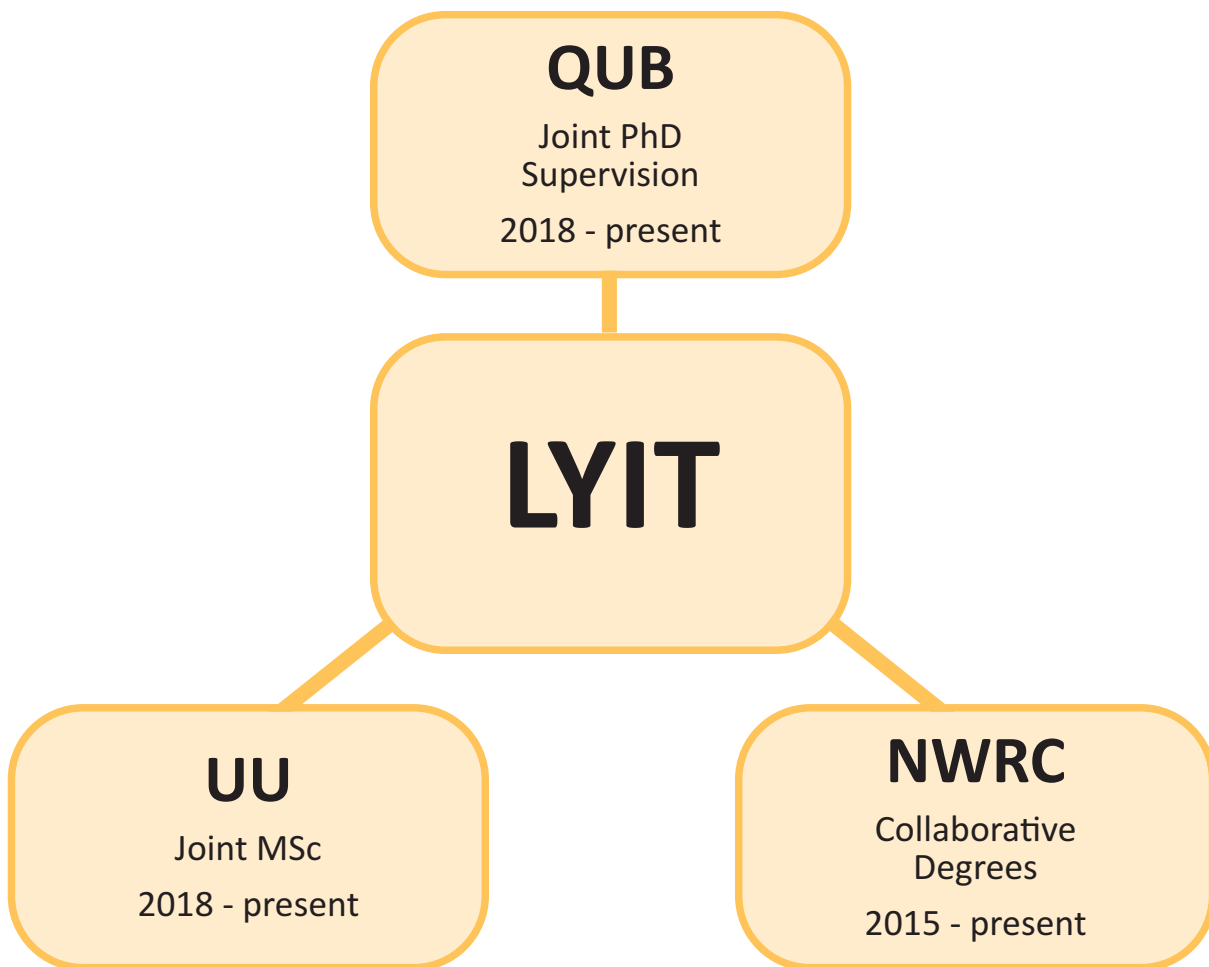
Over 216,000 students were enrolled in ROI HEIs in 2015/16, almost four times the 55,000 enrolled in NI HEIs. The cross-border flow of students in 2015/16 totaled 3,395 – 1,200 NI students at ROI HEIs and 2,195 ROI students at NI HEIs. However, there has been a substantial change in the flow of students over recent years, with ROI students at NI HEIs down 38% between 2011/12 and 2015/16 and NI students at ROI HEIs up 24% over the same period.¹¹ Both groups currently benefit from being treated as EU students with heavily subsidised undergraduate fees or charges of circa €3,000 in the Republic and £3,805 (€4,235) in the North. It is worth noting that Universities Ireland offers scholarships, each worth €15,000, to students who have been accepted to undertake a recognised programme at a university on the island of Ireland that is not in the same jurisdiction as the university where they have previously studied.

An Overview of Higher Education Provision at LYIT

Emerging Government policy in the Republic of Ireland in the 1960s led to the establishment of Regional Technical Colleges (RTCs) in the 1970s, with RTC Letterkenny opening in 1971, and re-designated as Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LYIT) in 1998. LYIT aims to foster a progressive learning environment. Our reach is both local and international, attracting a diverse student body of almost 4,500 students from Ireland and 31 countries across the globe. We have worked to foster close relationships with the wider local community and partnerships with indigenous and international businesses. We have two modern integrated campuses in Letterkenny and Killybegs. Approximately 59% of our full-time student cohort are SUSI grant recipients, allowing students from all backgrounds, abilities and disabilities to achieve their educational goals and find relevant employment in their own region, with awards available from Level 6 (Higher Certificate) right up to Level 10 (PhD).

A key priority for LYIT is cross border engagement, and collaboration with Queens University Belfast (QUB), Ulster University (UU), and North West Regional College (NWRC) (as illustrated in *figure 1*).

Figure 1: LYIT and our cross-border partners



In some cases, formal memoranda of understanding have been agreed with our partners, in others there is a flexible arrangement but the philosophy is to ensure that all our partners see LYIT as a partner and resource to work with for the benefit of the region. We currently work with the cross-border FE/HE Cluster, to meet the needs of our specific region. The North West City Region growth agenda has been firmly established through the North West Strategic Growth Partnership (NWSGP) and associated structures. The NWSGP has been co-designed and agreed by local and central government in both jurisdictions as the vehicle for co-ordinating and influencing all aspects of future growth of the North West City Region, and is the endorsed mechanism via the North South Ministerial Council for senior central government officials and their Departments to engage with the North West City Region on collaborative approaches to growth. On 23 February 2018 the NWSGP, in partnership with the higher and further education and training institutions of the North West City Region, announced a new agreement in education, training and innovation for the North West City Region. The agreement is the result of years of successful collaborative working amongst the four education sector providers: Letterkenny Institute for Technology (LYIT), Ulster University (UU), North West Regional College (NWRC) and Donegal Education and Training Board (DETB) – with the aim of improving access to higher and further level education and training to students living and studying in the North West City Region. This project, which achieved initial funding support through the HEA for higher education landscape reform, is also aligned with the National Strategy for Higher

Education to 2030 (January 2011) in respect of cross-border collaboration and regional development. Collaboration across the system nationally will also continue to be encouraged, focusing on areas where there is potential to build national scale and strength. There is also significant potential for institutional collaboration on a North-South basis to advance cross-border regional development and strategically advance Irish higher education on an all-island basis.

Case Studies in Partnership and Collaboration

Case Study 1: MSc in Leadership and Innovation in the Public Service

This programme was developed by LYIT and Ulster University in collaboration with the Office of An Taoiseach and the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister who were integral to deciding on the content, structure and philosophy of the programme. The structure is designed to maximise the scope for work-based learning and to develop executive networks for sharing insights from the collective Public Service experience. To date, public service managers including Principal Officers, Assistant Principal Officers, Heads of Function and Heads of Technology from more than sixty departments and agencies have benefited from the programme.

The programme is ongoing and the targeted outcomes for the programme are to:

- (a) Promote North/South collaboration with tangible outputs in terms of public service improvements
- (b) Develop an All-Island network of innovation expertise
- (c) Create opportunities for closer working relationships between senior public servants North and South
- (d) Leverage international best practice via action learning to effect sustained public service innovation

The programme philosophy is based entirely on enhancing innovation and efficiency in the delivery of contemporary public services. The unique all-island collaboration between the programme partners and the pooling of resources in itself is a flagship for collaboration in higher education. It uniquely draws on the expertise and resources of the higher education and Government partners and participating senior managers, North and South, to create sustainable innovation networks.

This is LYIT's longest established collaborative programme, and its most significant in terms of student numbers. It was the first joint Masters programme of its kind in Ireland. Since its launch in 2002, 261 public service managers have undertaken this unique joint executive Masters programme. It was the first taught postgraduate programme in LYIT and paved the way for the development of a major growth in postgraduate provision in the ensuing period; by 2019/20 postgraduate students accounted for 15% of all LYIT graduates. The involvement and support from government departments in both jurisdictions, the use of international guest speakers and the opportunity to learn collaboratively from fellow senior public service managers across the island of Ireland has led to important innovations and change initiatives across the civil and public services in both jurisdictions.

The development and validation of this programme presented unique challenges. Formal collaborative agreements, joint awarding agreements and even joint degree parchments had to be agreed between three parties: LYIT; Quality and Qualification Ireland (QQI) – previously the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC); and Ulster University. At the time, LYIT had delegated authority from HETAC to make postgraduate awards, but did not have delegated authority to make joint awards. This made for very bureaucratic development and approval processes, a situation which no longer pertains since LYIT became a full Designated Awarding Body up to Masters Degree level in January 2020. As a joint award, this represents the pinnacle of collaborative provision, but from a quality assurance perspective it also presents unique challenges. Foremost among these is the necessity to operate under an agreed set of exam regulations, which by definition will differ from the exam regulations of one of the HEIs. Interestingly, and in an unusual procedural quirk, under a dual registration regime, it did result in separate student disciplinary procedures applying, depending on where students were registered. As a joint programme, there is a significant additional overhead for both parties, but this is central to building and maintaining relationships. Joint management meetings, joint course leaders, joint programme boards, joint exam boards and joint conferring ceremonies are just part of what makes this a truly joint programme.

Case Study 2: Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood, Care, Health and Education

The Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood, Care, Health and Education is delivered in a partnership between LYIT and the North West Regional College (NWRC). The programme is designed to upskill those who already hold a UK Level 5 (or ROI Level 6) qualification in Early Childhood Studies or Advanced Practice, to Degree level. Students enter at year three of the four-year programme, which is delivered through blended learning at the Strand Road campus of NWRC and at the Letterkenny campus of LYIT.

This was the first of five add-on bachelor degree programmes to be delivered by LYIT in collaboration with NWRC. It has run for the last five years, and since its inception in 2015/16, 101 students have availed of this collaborative progression opportunity. The delivery model is particularly well suited to mature students and those who are not in a position to relocate outside of the region to pursue an honours degree qualification. It is part of a strategy to expand the higher education capacity in the northwest region, while mutually recognising qualifications on a bi-jurisdictional basis. This progression from Higher National Diplomas and Foundation Degrees to Honours Degrees is entirely consistent with national and international policy on access, transfer and progression. While the qualification is awarded by LYIT, the collaborative nature of the programme means that it is jointly delivered by staff from both institutions. The programme is an exemplar of collaborative programme provision that meets a regional need on a cross-border basis, while at the same time contributing to professionalising of the childcare sector.

From a quality assurance perspective, like all collaborative programmes, this involves significant additional management and administrative overhead for both parties, including quite onerous due diligence processes, the development of formal collaborative and financial agreements and ongoing management of the relationship between both parties. This programme was the first to go through the Institute's new due diligence process within the approved policy on collaborative, joint and

transnational awards. As such, it served as a pilot for the new policy and procedures, and a template for future collaborative arrangements. Once the collaborative model and associated processes were agreed, the addition of subsequent programmes was relatively straightforward. Joint planning meetings, joint programme boards and joint exam boards have been the hallmark of the success of this collaboration, underpinned by the development of close relationships of trust between both parties.

Case Study 3: PhD provision at the Bryden Centre

LYIT/Queens University collaborative PhD provision commenced in 2018. The Bryden Centre is a €9.7 million cross-border research centre for renewable energy projects. Funded by the EU's INTERREG Programme, the Bryden Centre for Advanced Marine and Bio-Energy Research hosts 34 PhD students across the marine and bio-energy disciplines. Match-funding for the project was provided by the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland and the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation in Ireland. This research includes the use of tidal power at Strangford Lough and the North Antrim Coast, ocean energy sites in Western Scotland, as well as the potential for wave and tidal power generation in Donegal. Additional partners include: the University of the Highlands and Islands, Ulster University, the Agri-Food & Biosciences Institute, Donegal County Council and Dumfries and Galloway Council.

Approaching the final phase of the project, much has been achieved. True multi-disciplinary teams have been established across collaborating institutions and industry partners. Projects tackling real-world challenges to advance design and use of key technologies, prevent harm to the environment and improve social acceptance are delivering outcomes that have led to, for example, major inward investment into novel bioenergy plant and greater understanding of the interactions of marine life with man-made structures. Equally important have been the successful capacity building actions and the strong inter-institutional and cross-disciplinary links that have been formed. Capital investment to establish new research capability has been beneficial. However, the major accomplishment is people centered. Not just the 34 PhD qualified researchers but also the development of supervisory and research direction skills within the partners. Academics at the established university partners have valued exposure to different disciplines, industry and non-academic stakeholders across the region. This change in perspective has led to a substantial upswing in multi-disciplinary work and was instrumental in the establishment of an all-Ireland climate-change and biodiversity research network.

The establishment of the Bryden Centre at LYIT has been a major step forward on the journey towards the expansion of established high-value industries and attraction of new sectors such as marine energy to the region. The experience gained through participating in the Bryden Centre with the strong link to Queen's University Belfast has given LYIT an additional six PhD places over the last three academic years and contributed to the submission for validation by Qualifications and Quality Ireland (QQI) of a new PhD programme in computing in 2019. This in turn will further help build capacity to achieve LYIT's research metrics as part of the ambition of the Connacht-Ulster Alliance (CUA) to attain technological university status in the near future. The collaborative PhD programme has helped develop PhD supervisory skills amongst existing staff and more generally build and extend research capability, facilities and expertise. It has also helped to establish a pathway for LYIT graduates to more readily

pursue a research career, retaining and developing future local industry leaders in the region. Coupled with further investment in capacity building and potentially the ability to establish research career pathways, the doctoral training model will be central to any future proposal for Bryden 2 and will play an important part in supporting LYIT to deliver on its technological university ambition.

Observations and reflections

These collaborative cross-border programmes have afforded new opportunities to students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels and contributed to expanding the higher education capacity, and ultimately the economic potential, of the north-west region. The joint Masters programme had a significant organisational impact across a large range of departments in the public service and provides a template and roadmap for future programme collaboration. The Bryden Centre PhD programme has played an important role in increasing the research and innovation capacity at LYIT and providing access to local companies for R&D to support their growth and economic potential. O'Dowd reflects that promoting cross-border co-operation goes 'against the grain' in many respects.¹² In contrast the economic, social and cultural importance of mobility and cross border cooperation between higher education institutions in NI and the ROI are highlighted in *Graduating to Success*.¹³ This level of activity has the potential to drive the growth of the all-island economy, broaden the pool of graduates both North and South and support the ongoing peace process. The cross-border nature of our region can result in a fractured approach to development, resulting in opportunities to offer a wide range of opportunities and pathways being lost. Therefore, it is crucial that LYIT work in partnership with HEIs in Northern Ireland to protect the opportunities for our stakeholders by ensuring that they are not inhibited by physical, technological or bureaucratic borders or through implications of fees and admissions requirements. In the context of Brexit, we finish by reflecting that there remains a significant need for a joined up approach to issues of higher education policy that support peace and reconciliation on this shared island. LYIT continues to look for opportunities for collaborative projects utilising the quadruple helix model of academia working in partnership with the public, private and community/voluntary sectors. LYIT and its cross-border partners has ambitious plans to build on this successful collaboration and to further contribute to the emerging cross-border regional higher education and innovation ecosystem in Ireland's north-west.

Notes

- ¹ George Quigley, “North-South Cooperation in 2013: Towards an ever closer working partnership” (2019).
- ² Anthony Soares, “(Higher) Education Crossing the Border” (2014), p.1.
- ³ Milena Komarova, “Cross-border Student Mobility in Third Level Education: An Update” (2017), p.4.
- ⁴ Robert D. Osborne, “Cross-border Higher Education Collaboration in Europe: lessons for the two Irelands?”.
- ⁵ Jürgen Enders et al, *The European Higher Education and Research Landscape 2020: Scenarios and Strategic Debates* (2005).
- ⁶ Magnus Klofsten et al, “The entrepreneurial university as driver for economic growth and social change - Key strategic challenges” (2019).
- ⁷ Tõnis Mets et al, “Patterns in entrepreneurial competences as the perceived learning outcomes of entrepreneurship education: The case of Estonian HEIs” (2017).
- ⁸ David B. Audretsch, “From the entrepreneurial university to the university for the entrepreneurial society” (2014); Gerrit Wolfe, “Entrepreneurial university: a case study at Stony Brook University” (2016); and Ilie M. Taucean et al, “Roadmap to Entrepreneurial University – Case study” (2018).
- ⁹ Maribel Guerrero et al, “Economic impact of universities’ activities: An exploratory study of the United Kingdom” (2015).
- ¹⁰ Higher Education Authority and Department for the Economy, “An Analysis of Existing Statistics on Student Flows Between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in Higher Education” (2018), p.8.
- ¹¹ *ibid*, p.24.
- ¹² Liam O’Dowd, “The Future of Cross-Border Cooperation: Issues of sustainability”, p.23.
- ¹³ Department for Employment and Learning, “Graduating to Success” (2015).

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