

Response to “Student Mobility in Ireland and Northern Ireland”

The increase in global demand for skills gained in tertiary education, provides an important context for this Study. In the last two decades, Ireland and Northern Ireland have both witnessed a significant increase in the number of students progressing to higher education. This expansion is attributed to: demographic trends; economic growth and skills needs; and widening participation and expansion of universities and colleges, including the establishment of Technological Universities.

For Northern Ireland universities, the cap on undergraduate numbers presents complexities in terms of planning and puts pressure on places, with the knock-on effect of driving up entrance requirements for high demand courses, with over a third of undergraduates leaving NI for GB universities.

Improving the understanding of the factors impacting on student mobility and the socio-economic and cultural benefits, will provide valuable insights for policy makers, leaders in universities, colleges, schools, and for their students. With international rankings for HEIs and funding methodologies increasingly aligned to performance and outcomes, not meeting targets for recruitment and completion can also have reputational and financial implications. Moreover, in view of the pressures on public spending, rising costs of living and the emerging skills gaps, there is an imperative for policy makers and education leaders to examine and understand not only the patterns and factors influencing undergraduate student mobility but also the longer-term consequences.

This timely analysis of undergraduate enrolments is especially relevant for policy development and interventions at Government and institutional level, both North and South. Disaggregating the data to focus on undergraduate students provides improved visibility of the drivers and deterrents (for students) in studying outside home jurisdictions. Graduate destination data identifies that a high proportion of students who leave for their undergraduate studies, are more likely to seek employment after graduating in the same jurisdiction. Accordingly, further work to examine how retention, progression and destination of graduates align with student mobility at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels would be valuable to direct policy, strategies and interventions related to academic and workforce planning.

Moreover, the Study recognises that student mobility trends over the last decade need to take account of socio-political disruptions, including the impact of increased tuition fees in the UK, Brexit, and the Covid-19 pandemic, on universities and students. Additionally, Brexit created uncertainty for students about costs and employment rights, that impacted negatively on applications and enrolments. However, the joint commitment of British and Irish Governments to the Common Travel Area provides stability and reassurance for students studying in another jurisdiction. The Study also identifies that the pandemic impacted enrolments and mobility, and it is notable that additional funding and undergraduate places provided a boost to both third level enrolments and individuals' careers. Post-Covid-19, there is an expectation on universities to provide enhanced student supports, greater value for money and flexible modes of learning (Gardner, 2022). In any event students' choices on where to study will be

influenced by quality considerations, wider cultural and social experiences, and career prospects.

There is evidence that the lack of understanding and perceived complexity of the respective admissions systems of CAO and UCAS has a negative impact on student mobility (British Council, 2022). Improving access to reliable information on the respective Higher Education systems, application processes and student supports would certainly help address these barriers. Providing prospective students, their teachers, and advisors with access to tailored information and guidance on a shared portal, would ease the pathways through the application and admissions processes. It would also provide the benefit of improving data analysis and eliminate the need for schools and universities to deploy their own resources.

The lack of understanding of the portability of UK qualifications also presents challenges and acts as a barrier for undergraduate cross-border mobility. Historically, the CAO points equivalence has been based on four A levels being comparable to six subjects at Leaving Certificate. However, it is highly relevant that the secondary curriculum and university admissions in the UK are premised upon students taking three subjects at A Level. While the Study highlights that 3.6 % take 4 subjects at A Levels, this figure includes those taking double award and vocational subjects, that are not consistently accepted by all universities for admission.

It is evident from this Study, that the 'points differential' and the disparity in timing of CAO vs UCAS offers, discourages 'A' level students from applying to study at Irish universities. In contrast, Leaving Certificate students applying via UCAS, will have their offer held pending confirmation of results.

While the CAO system has undergone periodic reviews and adjustments since it was introduced in the 1970s, there is a broader debate ongoing in the sector on the effectiveness and fairness of an Admissions system that was designed for a higher education system when there were circa 15,000 applications. With the growth in participation rates and increase in places available, CAO processed 83,801 applications in 2023.

Taking account of the growing student numbers and the ongoing transformation across the Irish Higher Education landscape, stakeholders should have confidence that the admissions system to Irish universities draws on international best practice, treating all potential applicants equitably, including cross-border candidates, mature students, those with accessibility requirements and students progressing from Further Education and vocational pathways.

In the current economic climate, with budget pressures for institutions, families and individuals, the Study presents valuable insights for policy makers in considering the challenges, benefits, and implications of changing enrolment trends and student mobility. The Government's Shared Island Unit has made significant progress, facilitating dialogue on partnership and policy and to date has delivered on funding commitments, including £45m for a teaching facility at Ulster University's Magee campus in Derry. Meanwhile, the announcement in July 2023 by Minister Simon Harris TD of funding to support 150 additional places for Nursing and

Midwifery at Queen's University, in 2024, signals an exciting new approach to addressing skills shortages.

These recent commitments and investments, along with initiatives to be supported by the EU Peace Plus programme, present a renewed focus on the added value of inter institutional collaboration and building meaningful academic relationships. The welcome expansion of degree apprenticeships and new access pathways in partnership with SOLAS and ETBs also present enhanced opportunities for sustainable cross border collaboration.

In conclusion, a joined-up approach to maximising the return on investment in tertiary education, on an all-island basis, will present greater choice, opportunities and employment prospects for the graduates of the future.

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Professor Scott has held leadership positions in both jurisdictions. She formerly Pro Vice Chancellor at Ulster University, and was previously CEO & Principal for Northern Regional College and President of IT Sligo.

Gardner J (2021) Universities as Catalysts of Post-Covid Recovery and Renewal in Communities. In Building a More Sustainable and Democratic Future: Higher Education's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Council of Europe Higher Education Series, 25. Brussels

British Council Ireland (2022a). *Higher education mobility research: Ireland to UK. A review of higher education student flows from Ireland to the UK: 2017 to 2022.* Available at: <https://www.britishcouncil.ie/higher-education-mobility-research>