

A Students Perspective

We have been repeatedly told that “Brexit means Brexit” but it is still unclear what “Brexit” really means. Students in higher education today are the nurses, entrepreneurs, creative practitioners and business leaders of tomorrow. Their voice must be heard by negotiators as the process to exit the EU progresses and it is incumbent on students’ unions that this is realised.

Student Mobility

Student mobility into and out of the UK is a potentially major issue facing HE. The Erasmus+ programme relies on an EU framework and EU funding which has provided over 86,600 placements for students, young people and staff from the UK between 2014 and 2015¹. Students would be at a disadvantage if this development opportunity to live and study in other European countries was not available to them post-Brexit. Collaborative research and teaching would also be set to suffer if there was a discontinuation of the UK’s involvement in this scheme.

Erasmus+ also provide EU students with an opportunity to study in the UK. 125,300 EU students studied here in 2013/14, bringing an estimated £1.13bn worth of fees² and a diverse and rich culture to the higher education sector.

Cross-Border Movement

The potential of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland could potentially be very damaging if a common travel area is not maintained. As well as affecting trade, there may be an acute social impact upon border communities and those who live and study in different jurisdictions within the border regions.

In 2014/2015, just over 700 students from Northern Ireland were enrolled in universities, colleges and institutes of technology in the Republic of Ireland³. There are also large numbers of ROI citizens studying and working within HE in Northern Ireland, particularly on the Magee campus of Ulster University.

The post-Brexit reality could be Irish students being charged extortionate international student fees to study in NI, potentially driving them away from studying here. Students from both nations should not be priced out of education as a result of Brexit.

Following the exit, Ireland will be the only predominantly English speaking country in the EU. Coupled with a favourable tax scheme, it will be a very attractive location for foreign direct investment. Maintaining the ability for graduates to move to ROI to avail of opportunities following study should be prioritised.

Financial Implications

Brexit could put international students off studying in NI. A reduction in student numbers could lead to our universities losing many researchers and highly qualified lecturers as well as making it difficult to attract new talent. Maintaining access to opportunities for research collaboration with universities in EU member states and funding streams such as Horizon 2020, which has an available budget of around €80 billion⁴, should be carefully considered. NI universities are significantly underfunded by the government in comparison to institutions in the UK.

A reduction in funding from EU sources, coupled with continued underfunding from the devolved government could see a further reduction in student numbers and an inability for NI institutions to offer a student experience

¹ erasmusplus.org.uk/news/erasmus-uk-statistics-2014-2016

² [ukisa.org.uk/Info-for-universities-colleges---schools/Policy-research--statistics/Research--statistics/International-students-in-UK-HE/#International-\(non-UK\)-students-in-UK-HE-in-2013-14](https://ukisa.org.uk/Info-for-universities-colleges---schools/Policy-research--statistics/Research--statistics/International-students-in-UK-HE/#International-(non-UK)-students-in-UK-HE-in-2013-14)

³ hea.ie/node/1557

⁴ ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en/what-horizon-2020

comparable to the rest of the UK. This could in turn lead to an increase in tuition fees for home students, placing an already significant burden of debt on the future generation of NI.

Conclusions

Consideration must be given to the multi-faceted consequences of Brexit from a student perspective. Brexit could place HE institutions in precarious financial situations potentially leading to fee increases or cuts to student places. EU and ROI students might choose to study elsewhere due to uncertainty over student mobility, access to grants or potential fee liabilities. Research collaboration and funding which our universities currently enjoy may no longer be available. The situation for students and staff travelling across the Irish border, some on a daily basis, needs to be considered.

We are presented with an opportunity for the student movement to put forward strong arguments to those who will be negotiating on our behalf to ensure that a fair deal is reached for students. Ulster University Students' Union are committed to working and engaging with fellow students' unions, with NUS-USI, with the university and with wider civic society to provide our elected representatives with a vision of the post-Brexit society we would like to see.