

British Council Ireland



Higher Education Mobility Research: Ireland to UK

*A review of higher education student flows from
Ireland to the UK: 2017 to 2022*

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1 Introduction

Supporting higher education connections between the Ireland and the UK, as well as student mobility from Ireland to the UK, are priorities for both the British Council and British Embassy in Ireland. We are delighted to present this research which provides analysis on the quantitative data relating to student flows from Ireland to the UK since 2017.

This context paper, prepared by [Southern Cross Consulting](#), employs available **statistical data** to present a profile of students from the Republic of Ireland (hereafter referred to as Ireland), who studied at tertiary level in the UK between 2017 and 2021, or who applied to study in the UK in 2022.

Using UCAS application and HESA enrolment data, the paper explores levels of study, gender, study location in the UK and HE choices of these students and serves as a companion to a recent study undertaken by [Red Brick Research](#) on behalf of the British Council. Red Brick Research's study examined (through a qualitative approach) the reasoning behind student's decisions to study in the UK. Key findings from Red Brick Research's report have been incorporated into this report.¹

All data referenced here has been sourced from the websites linked below and was accessed in April and July 2022:

- The Universities and College Admission service (UK) [UCAS](#)
- The Higher Education Statistical Agency (UK) [HESA](#);
- The Higher Education Authority (Ireland) [HEA](#), and
- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, Institute for Statistics [UNESCO UIS](#).

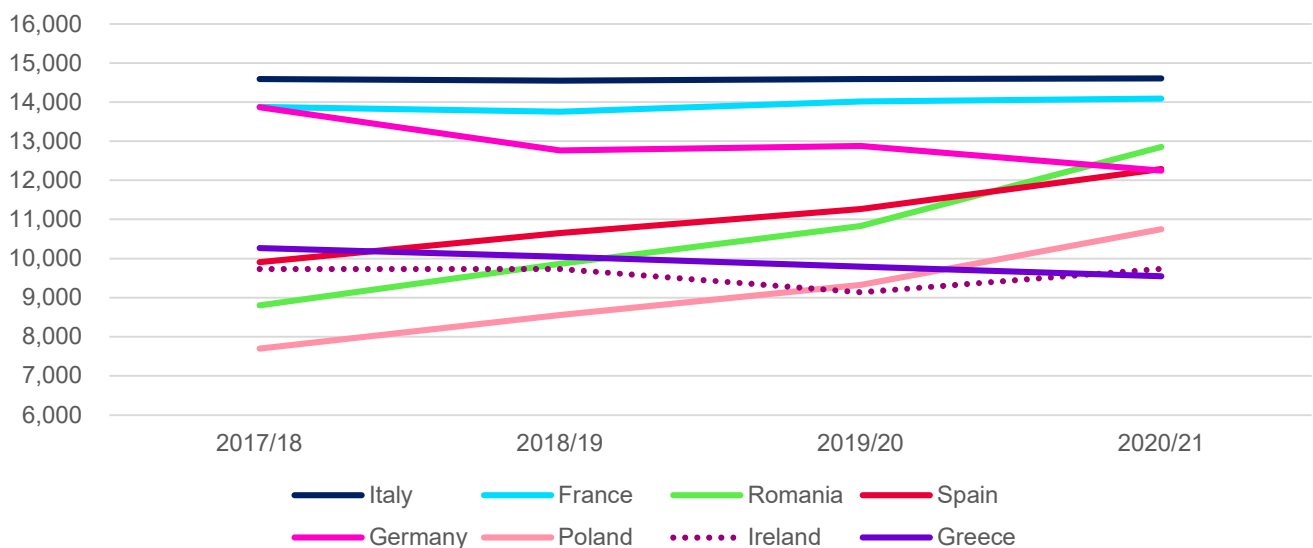
¹ The Red Brick Research study *Higher Education Mobility Research: Ireland to UK Qualitative Report* is available on British Council Ireland website www.britishcouncil.ie.

2 The UK as a destination for students from Ireland

Ireland has one of the highest levels of higher education participation in the world with almost 60 percent of 25-34-year-olds having a higher-level qualification and a 75 percent gross enrolment rate in tertiary education.² While over half of school leavers take up places in Irish universities and colleges, increasing numbers consider travelling beyond Ireland for their higher education experience.³

As proximate countries with a complex yet shared history, student flows between Ireland and UK have always been important.⁴ For the UK, students from Ireland have traditionally comprised an important proportion of the international student cohort. In 2014/15 students from Ireland (n=10,980) accounted for 2 percent of all international students and 9 percent of all EU students. By 2020/21 the total number of students from Ireland had dropped to 9,140 accounting for approximately 1.5 percent of all international students and 6 percent of EU students in the UK. Despite the decline in numbers, Ireland was the 7th most important EU sending country for the UK in 2020/21 (see figure 1), behind Poland and just ahead of Greece.⁵

Figure 1: EU enrolments in UK HEIs (2017/18 - 2020/21)



Source: HESA - www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/table-28#note

The UK's decision to leave the EU resulted in uncertainty around higher education opportunities, particularly for prospective students from Ireland and other EU countries. The lack of clarity around employment rights for EU citizens, changes to visa requirements, increased tuition costs and limited

² [Higher Education Authority \(Ireland\)](#) and [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#).

³ Precise data is not available here. [UNESCO Institute for Statistics](#) (UIS) figures suggest that 15,500 students from Ireland are studying abroad. However data on outbound mobility (beyond Erasmus+) is not routinely captured at this time and there is some evidence to suggest that these figures represent an under-reporting of student mobility from Ireland. For example, latest data from UIS indicates that there are 923 students from Ireland in the Netherlands, [Nuffic data](#) however shows that there are 2,017 (both accessed May 2022). Please also see footnote 9 and section 4 below.

⁴ Student flows between the **UK and Ireland** are showing signs of recovery following a drop in 2016/17. In 2020/21, 1,624 students from Northern Ireland and 1,525 students from Great Britain were enrolled in Irish HEIs, accounting for 12.4 percent of international students in Ireland.

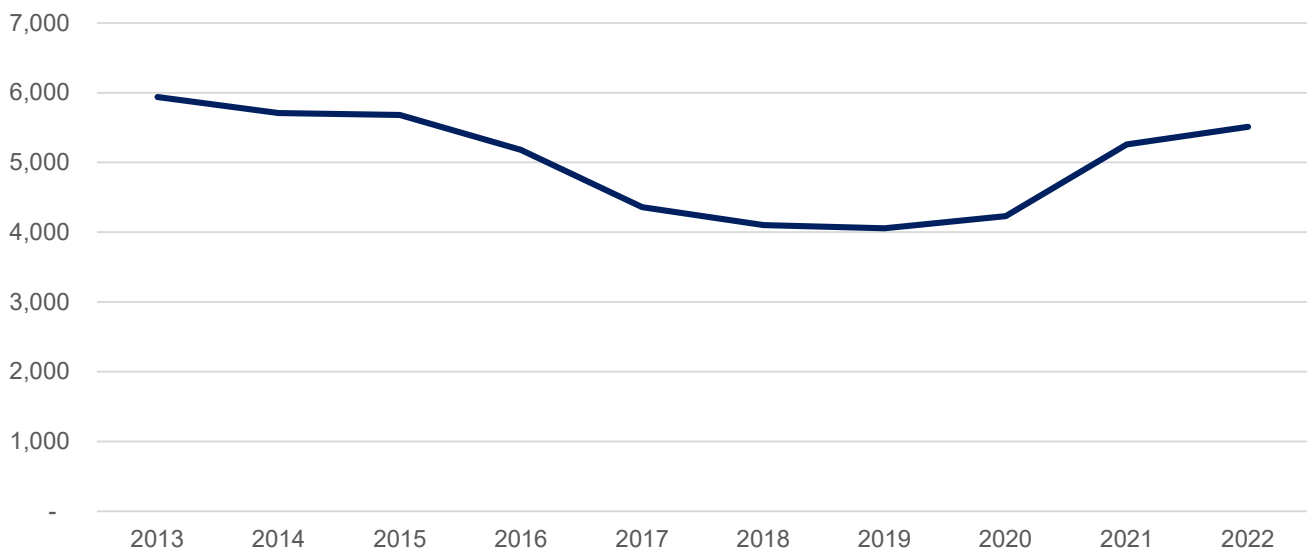
⁵ Source: HESA: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from#non-uk>

access to subsidised student loans, all combined to have a negative impact on the overall numbers of EU students applying to study in the UK from 2021 onward.

For most EU students the uncertainty noted above and the introduction of full international fees (rather than the lower 'EU fees' which previously applied) has resulted in shifts in application and enrolment patterns. Latest data issued by [HESA](#) (2020/21) indicates that **enrolments** from the EU overall increased by 3.5 percent over the previous year. Eastern European countries in particular show strong growth in the final year of entry before tuition fee increases were introduced, likely taking advantage of the last chance to study in the UK at discounted rates (e.g., enrolments from Romania and Poland were up by 24 percent and 25 percent respectively, while enrolments from France and Italy were flat and those from Germany declined). [UCAS](#) on the other hand reports that EU **applicants** for undergraduate study in the UK declined by 51 percent in 2020 on the previous year, with a further 19 percent decline evident in 2022. The decline is particularly evident from Eastern European countries (e.g., applicant numbers from Romania and Poland have declined by 45 percent and 35 percent respectively, while those from France and Germany are down by 20 percent and 17 percent respectively).

For students from Ireland however, the clarity provided by the Irish and UK government's joint recommitment to the [Common Travel Agreement](#) (CTA) ensures the maintenance of associated reciprocal rights for citizens of both countries with respect to all levels of education, employment, healthcare and social benefits. The CTA provides assurances that students from Ireland would continue to qualify for 'home fee' status and a key advantage of the CTA is the absence of any requirement for visa or related paperwork. Additionally, bank accounts (and digital bank services like Revolut), further create the borderless perception between Ireland and the UK. Taken together, these and other related benefits of the CTA, are likely to be responsible for the recovery in applicant numbers noted since 2020.⁶ This confidence may result in Ireland becoming the UK's leading EU source country for international students.

Figure 2: Undergraduate applicants to UK HEIs from Ireland, June deadline (2013 – 2022)



Source: UCAS, June 30 application deadline. www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-releases/applicant-releases-2022-cycle/2022-cycle-applicant-figures-30-june-deadline

⁶ Undergraduates from Ireland studying in England and Scotland pay fees of up to £9,250 per year, £9,000 in Wales (which have more than doubled since 2020) and £4,395 in Northern Ireland. The 2021/22 academic year will be the first where students from Ireland will be required to pay fees in Scotland. Previously, no fees applied to students from EU countries studying in Scotland.

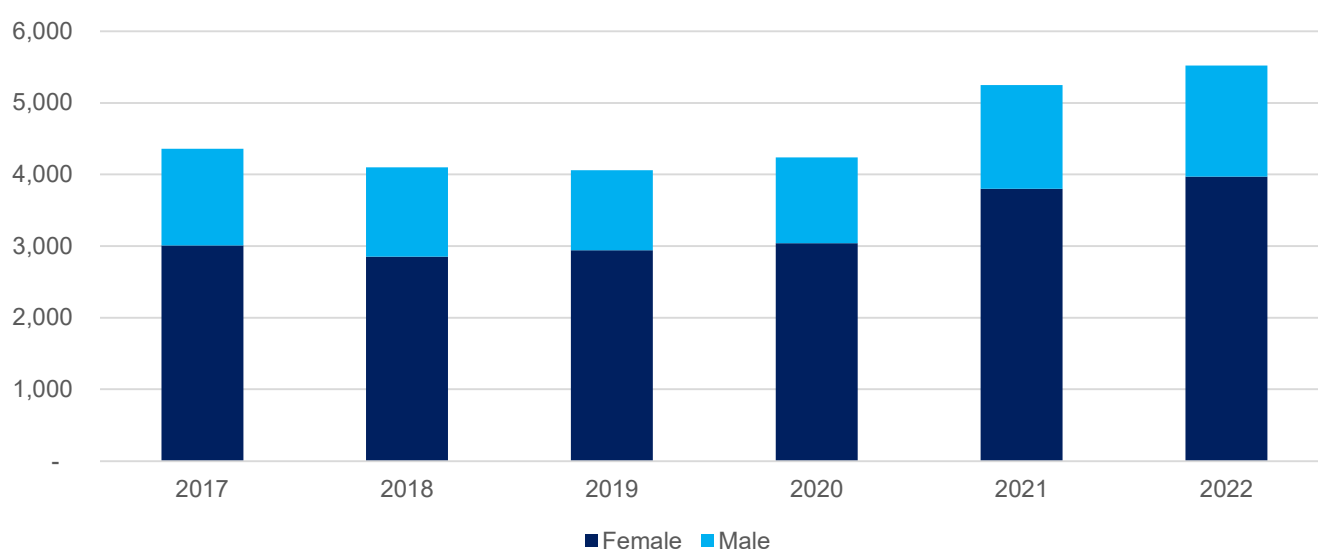
Students from Ireland can apply for a tuition loan in the UK, but not a maintenance grant. In some cases, these students are eligible for an [Irish government maintenance grant](#) to study in the UK. For further information please see: [UCAS](#); [UKCISA](#) and [Citizens' Information](#).

As figure 2 above illustrates while applications declined for several years, since 2020 there has been growth and an increase in undergraduate applications to the UK. 2022 applicant levels from Ireland (n=5,510) have climbed back up towards 2015 levels, increasing 24 percent between 2020 and 2021 and a further 5 percent in 2022. Additionally, first year enrolments from Ireland increased by 15 percent between 2019/20 and 2020/21 ([HESA](#)).

2.1.1 Gender

As figure 3 below shows, 72 percent of applicants from Ireland to UK HEs in 2022 were female. This represents a higher proportion than international applicants to the UK in general, which averages at 61 percent.

Figure 3: Applicants from Ireland to UK HEIs by gender (2017-2022)



Source: UCAS, June 30 application deadline.

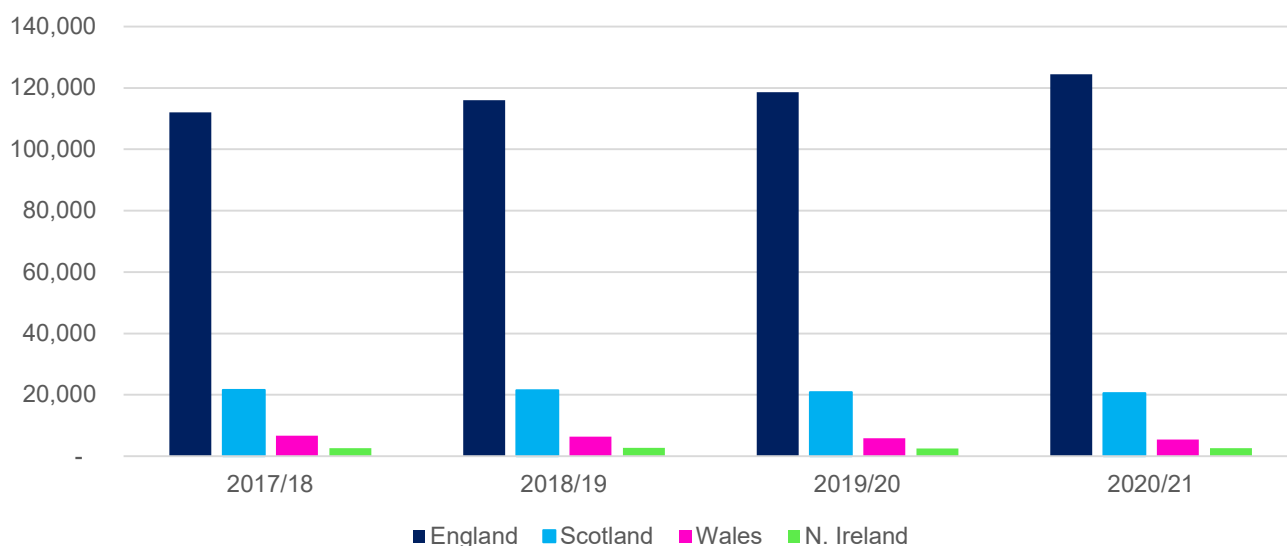
Data from HESA shows that this gender differential is largely explained by differences in field of study. Students from Ireland in most subject areas generally have a similar gender balance to other international students in that field, but in the 2020/21 academic year 20 percent of undergraduates from Ireland were studying subjects in the field of nursing and midwifery compared to just 3 percent of all international undergraduate students. As a large majority of nursing students are female, a higher proportion of nursing students means that female undergraduates make up a larger share of the total. The reasons behind this sharp growth in enrolment on nursing and midwifery programmes over the last two years (see figure 3) are not fully understood at this time.

In contrast, the male-dominated fields of engineering and computer science are both substantially less popular among undergraduates from Ireland than among all international undergraduate students. This difference again increases the proportion of female students from Ireland despite the gender ratio for students from Ireland in these subject areas being similar to the overall average. Students from Ireland are also less likely than average to study business & management, a field which is relatively close to gender parity and therefore has a higher-than-average proportion of male students compared to other subject areas.

2.1.2 Regional Choices

Setting the context, figure 4 shows that in 2020/21, 147,800 students from EU countries were studying in the UK. Of this cohort, 81 percent were studying in England, 13 percent in Scotland, 4 percent in Wales and 2 percent in Northern Ireland. For EU students, England has become increasingly important as a destination over the last four years at the expense of Scotland and Wales, with Northern Ireland remaining stable. However, students from Ireland account for 84 percent of EU students in Northern Ireland (HESA).

Figure 4: Location of students from the EU within the UK (2017/18 - 2020/21)



Source: HESA - www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-study

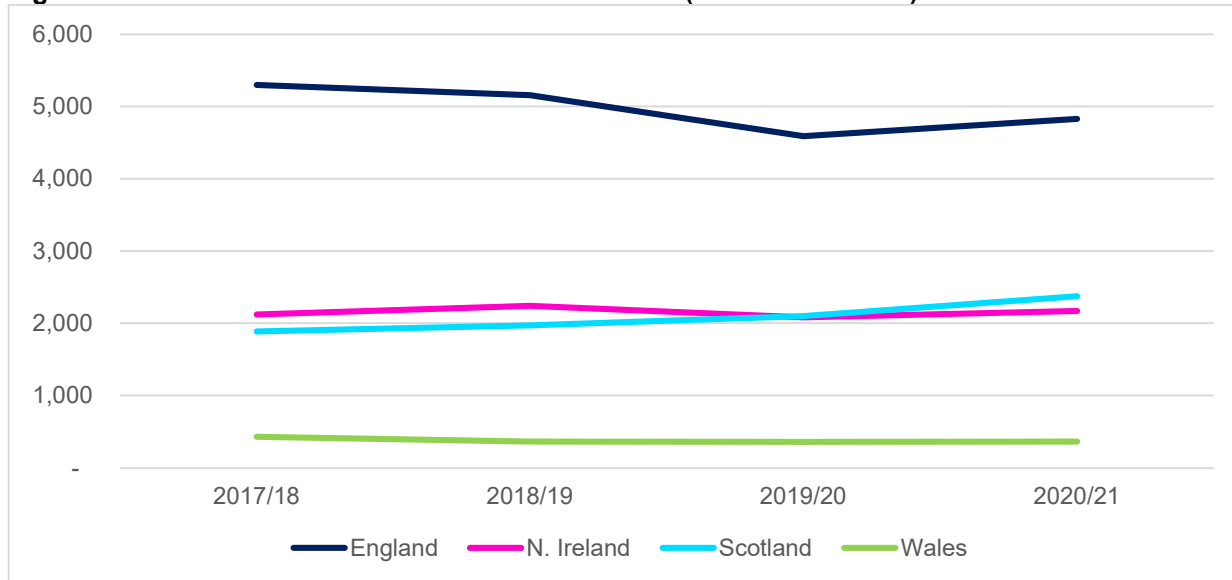
In common with students from most other EU countries, figure 5 shows that students from Ireland also favour England as a destination. The popularity of Northern Ireland and Scotland means that the percentage of students from Ireland choosing to study in England is much lower than the average for EU students (50 percent of students from Ireland in comparison to over 80 percent of students from the EU). HESA figures for 2020/21 show 4,830 students from Ireland were studying in England. This demonstrates a decline from 5,300 in 2017/18 which bottomed out at 4,590 in 2019/20. The reasons behind the recovery evident at present are unclear but are likely related to the increasing confidence in the stability offered by the CTA.

HESA data indicates that students from Ireland based in England are spread across the country with particular concentrations found in London (26 percent, n=1,240 students), where the most popular HE providers are University College London, King's College London and Imperial College London.

The Southeast is the next region of choice for students from Ireland (15 percent, n=740 students) with University of Oxford, Buckinghamshire New University and the University of Southampton being the most popular choices.

The Northwest is the third most popular region of England for students from Ireland with 665 students (14 percent of those studying in England). Liverpool John Moores University, The University of Liverpool and The University of Manchester being the most attractive choices (see tables 1 and 2, for top 10 HE choices).

Figure 5: Location of students from Ireland in the UK (2017/18 - 2020/21)



Source: HESA - www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-study

Students from Ireland are attracted to Scotland and Northern Ireland more than other nationalities (see above) with 24 percent (n=2,375) and 22 percent (n=2,179) of enrolled students respectively located here in 2020/21. The numbers of students from Ireland studying in Scotland have increased slightly during the period under review while numbers studying in Northern Ireland dipped somewhat in 2019/20, recovering again in 2020/21.

The introduction of fees for students from Ireland from 2021/22 for the first time, may have an impact on applications to Scottish universities from this point forward. In Scotland, the top choices are Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh; Robert Gordon University; the University of Edinburgh and University of Stirling (although there are some variations when disaggregated by undergraduate and postgraduate as highlighted in tables 1 and 2 below).

Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast are consistently the top two universities chosen by students from Ireland for both undergraduate and postgraduate studies. Given the proximity of Northern Ireland HEIs it is not surprising that these locations and institutions are popular.

HEA data from Ireland suggests that students from Northern Ireland who choose to study in Ireland are most likely to originate from border counties (although there is some evidence that this is beginning to change) while this data is not available for students from Ireland, it is likely that geographical proximity is a significant influencing factor here (see section 3).

Overall, as noted, HESA figures indicate that students from Ireland account for 84 percent of EU students and 15 percent of all international students in Northern Ireland.

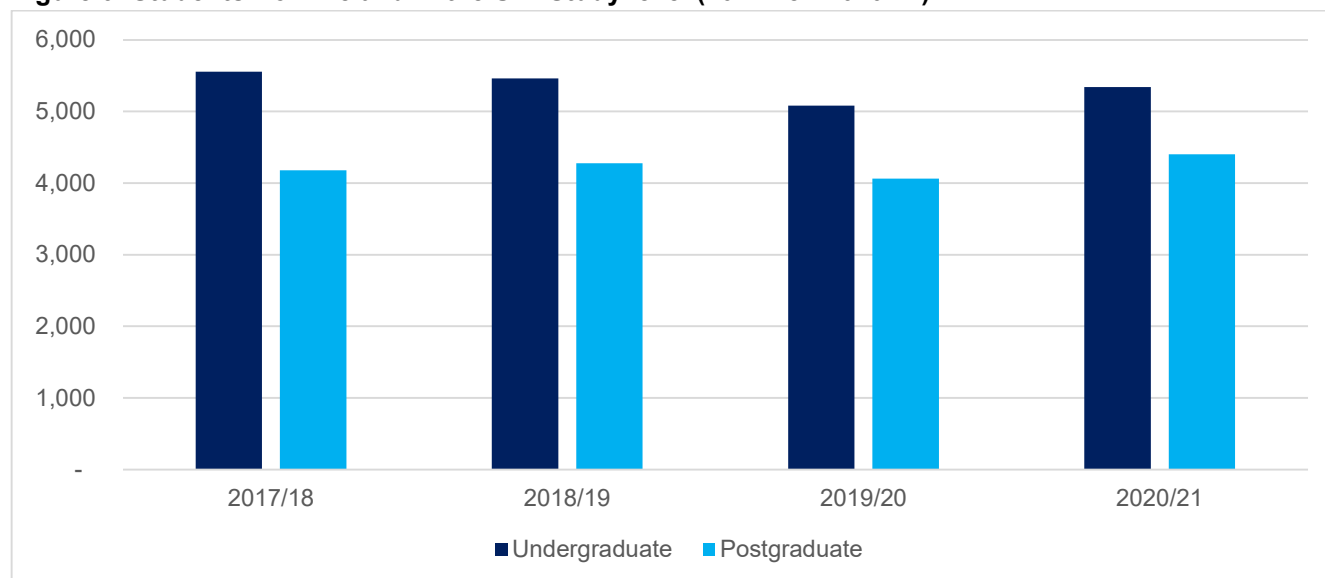
At 4 percent, the numbers of students from Ireland choosing to study in Wales is low and decreasing slightly (from n=430 in 2017/18 to n=365 in 2020/21). The most popular universities are Cardiff University, Bangor University and the University of South Wales.

2.1.3 Levels of Study

Figure 6 illustrates the proportion of students from Ireland at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in the UK. Fifty-five percent are studying at undergraduate level, a drop of 2 percent from 2017/18. Of

those studying at postgraduate level (45 percent), 79 percent are taking 'taught' programmes and 21 percent are taking research programmes – available data does not disaggregate between research master's and PhD programmes (see tables 1 and 2 for details on top undergraduate and postgraduate HEI choices for students from Ireland).

Figure 6: Students from Ireland in the UK: Study level (2017/18 - 2020/21)



Source: HESA: www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-study

In absolute numbers those studying at undergraduate level have decreased from 5,555 in 2017/18 to 5,340 in 2020/21, while those at postgraduate level have increased from 4,180 to 4,400 in the same period.

Table 1: Top 10 UK HE Providers for Undergraduate Students from Ireland (2018/19 - 2020/21)

2018/19 HE Provider	No.	2019/20 HE Provider	No.	2020/21 HE Provider	No.
Ulster University	880	Ulster University	670	Ulster University	700
Queens University Belfast	345	Queens University Belfast	405	Queens University Belfast	440
Queen Margaret University	230	Queen Margaret University	240	Queen Margaret University	300
Robert Gordon University	195	Robert Gordon University	215	Robert Gordon University	245
Buckinghamshire New University	185	Stirling University	205	Stirling University	230
Stirling University	170	Edinburgh Napier University	180	Edinburgh Napier University	215

Edinburgh Napier University	135	Buckinghamshire New University	105	Glasgow Caledonian University	125
Glasgow Caledonian University	95	Glasgow Caledonian University	105	University of Edinburgh	110
University of Southampton	95	University of Edinburgh	90	University of Dundee	105
University of Edinburgh	55	University of Dundee	80	Anglia Ruskin University	85

Source: HESA - <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-study> (accessed July 2022)

Although some shifts are evident, there has been little change over the last three years in the most popular UK HE providers for students from Ireland. Table 1 shows the consistence prominence of Northern Ireland's two universities as well as Queen Margaret University and Robert Gordon University in Scotland for undergraduate studies.

Table 2 shows that Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast remain the most popular HEI choices for postgraduate students from Ireland in the UK, with the University of Edinburgh, Queen Margaret University and University College London consistently ranking in the top five over the last few years. Highly ranked HEIs such as the University of Oxford and University of Cambridge enter the mix at this level.

Table 2: Top 10 UK HE providers for Postgraduate Students from Ireland (2018/19-2020/21)

2018/19 HE Provider	No.	2019/20 HE Provider	No.	2020/21 HE Provider	No.
Ulster University	555	Ulster University	575	Ulster University	570
Queens University Belfast	430	Queens University Belfast	405	Queens University Belfast	420
University of Edinburgh	155	University of Edinburgh	150	University of Edinburgh	145
Queen Margaret University	130	Queen Margaret University	125	University College London	125
University College London	130	University College London	125	Queen Margaret University	120
Oxford University	90	Oxford University	90	Oxford University	105
University of Birmingham	75	University of Glasgow	85	University of Glasgow	95

University of Glasgow	75	University of Cambridge	80	University of Liverpool	90
Imperial College	75	Imperial College	75	University of Cambridge	85
University of Warwick	75	University of Warwick	70	St Mary's Twickenham	75

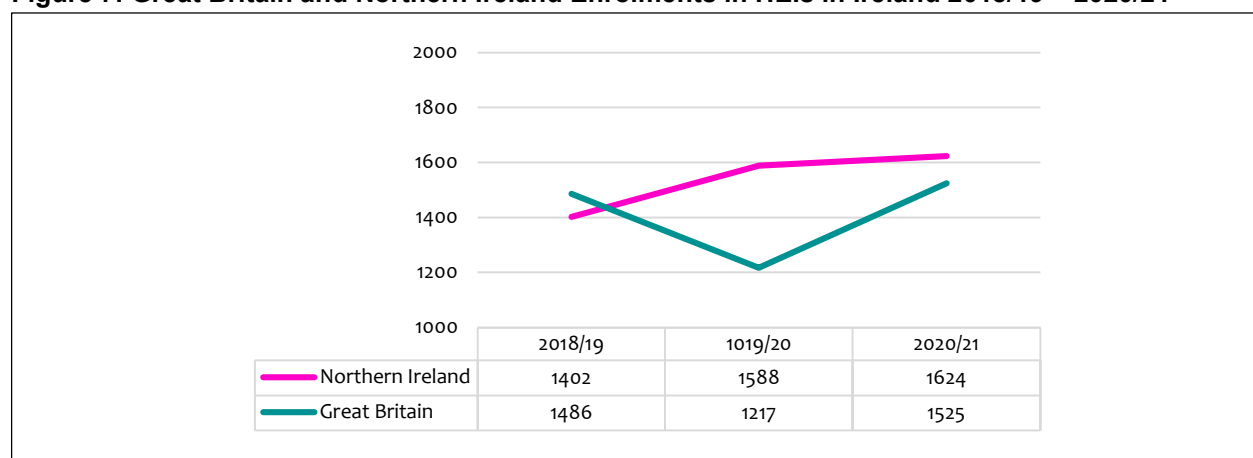
Source: HESA - www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-study

HESA data above shows that for research students, choices shift again: in Northern Ireland there are proportionately fewer research students at Ulster University and more at Queen's University Belfast (in 2020/21 there were 860 postgraduate research students from Ireland enrolled in the UK, 140 of whom were studying at Queen's University Belfast, 55 at University of Cambridge and 55 each at Ulster University and University of Edinburgh).

2.1.4 Student Flows from the UK to Ireland

Although the flow of students from the UK to Ireland is lower in numbers than from Ireland to the UK (3,149 in 2020/20) and has been uneven over time, the numbers appear to be increasing as highlighted by figure 7 below.

Figure 7: Great Britain and Northern Ireland Enrolments in HEIs in Ireland 2018/19 – 2020/21



Source: HEA: <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/access-our-data/access-our-data-students/>

Latest undergraduate application figures from Ireland's Central Applications Office (CAO) corroborate these trends and show that undergraduate applications from Northern Ireland which fell from a high of 1,903 in 2016, dropping to 1,378 in 2019, climbed back up 1,439 in 2021. Undergraduate applications from Great Britain fell from 1,054 in 2015 to 818 in 2019, recovering to 965 in 2021, a sign that post-Brexit Ireland is again being considered as an option for UK students.

HEA figures for academic year 2020/21 show that at undergraduate level, students from Northern Ireland are predominantly studying business, administration and law programmes (24 percent) followed in importance by arts and humanities (20 percent) and health and welfare (17 percent). At postgraduate level health and welfare programmes are most important (22 percent), followed by business, administration and law (18 percent) and arts and humanities (17 percent).

Students from Great Britain focus on arts and humanities subjects at undergraduate level in Irish HEIs (32 percent), followed by health and welfare (19 percent) and business, administration and law programmes. At postgraduate level arts and humanities subjects continue to predominate (22 percent), followed by health and welfare (16 percent) and business, administration and law programmes (15.5 percent).

UK students may be influenced to study in Ireland because of language, common heritage, ease of access (limited fees; geographical proximity; EU member state, no visa requirements...), and the academic quality of their chosen HEI or programme. It is also important to highlight the common approaches to curriculum and institutional processes including quality assurance and assessment strategies and the high employment opportunities which exist in Ireland.

Finally, the fact that Ireland remains a member of the EU, with access to programmes such as Horizon may influence some students/researchers. As is the case for all international students, choices are likely to be nuanced and comprise several motivating and influencing factors.

3 Why Students from Ireland Choose to Study in the UK

Several factors impinge upon a student's decision to study in another country, including programme availability, career opportunities and new cultural and life experiences. With respect to the large numbers of students from Ireland who study in the UK, the high percentages choosing HE providers in Northern Ireland (22 percent, compared to 2 percent of all EU students) and Scotland (24 percent compared to 13 percent of all EU students) emphasises the particular importance of proximity (and possibly tradition, family linkages and language). However to date, little research has been undertaken to specifically understand the push / pull factors at play for these students.

The recently released research study commissioned by the British Council and carried out by Red Brick Research is timely and helps shed light on the influences and decision-making processes of students from Ireland who are considering studying at undergraduate level in the UK, or who are studying in the UK. This study highlights key reasons why students from Ireland consider studying in the UK (figure 8 below).

The findings suggest that at early decision-making stages students are influenced by the **variety of course options**, joint honours degrees and specialist options available in UK HE providers.

Figure 8: Why Students from Ireland Choose to Study in the UK

Students from Ireland are initially attracted towards studying in the UK through personal recommendations / connections and perceived advantages in the UK education system



Personal recommendation from friend / family

A personal recommendation holds particular importance for students. Many knew a friend or family member who studied in the UK, or lives there now, and their insight into life in the UK swayed them towards applying.



UCAS system seen as holistic and fair

Whilst the incorporation of a personal statement is daunting for some, it's viewed as a more inclusive way to apply to university than solely points-based like the CAO. Students like the chance to 'sell themselves', and that the points system UCAS uses is static.



Numerous course options and varieties

The UK is seen to excel in the variety of course options it offers, particularly the ability to combine courses for Joint Honours. There is a greater variety of universities offering these courses, as well as more niche qualifications (e.g., radiography).

Source: British Council Ireland Higher Education Undergraduate Mobility Irl to UK Qualitative Report, unpublished version 2022

With regard to options and specialist fields, programmes which lead to qualifications in allied health fields such as radiography, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy attract high numbers of applications in Ireland. With limited places, the resulting high points required for acceptance means that many students considering these fields may look to the UK to gain their qualifications (which are accepted in both countries and across the EU).

Undergraduate students are also attracted by the UK application system '**UCAS**', which differs considerably from Ireland's '**CAO**' system. The latter is almost entirely 'points' based connecting to the results of the final school state examinations, the Leaving Certificate. Entry points for programmes can fluctuate based on the number of applications, a system which is often viewed as unfair⁷. UCAS incorporates a personal statement element which Red Brick Research note is viewed as more inclusive and gives students a chance to 'sell themselves'.

The UCAS system was also found to be a key 'pain point' for students from Ireland, who do not have experience with the personal statement approach and have difficulty finding guidance on this. Additionally, guidance teachers were noted as often not having the required information about UCAS and how their Leaving Certificate points translate to the UCAS system.

Figure 9: Perceived Advantages for Students from Ireland Who Choose to Study in the UK



Source: British Council Ireland Higher Education Undergraduate Mobility Irl to UK Qualitative Report, unpublished version 2022

Accommodation was found to be an important push *and* pull factor for students from Ireland considering studying in the UK. The paucity of affordable accommodation in Ireland, particularly in Dublin, has received much attention and is a major concern for prospective students. That university accommodation is guaranteed in the UK for international students ameliorates this concern and was found to be an important attraction.

The UK's **cultural diversity** was highlighted as an important attracting factor for prospective students (figure 9 above). As is the case with many considering studying abroad globally, respondents described the appeal of meeting new people, creating new memories and enjoying new experiences. The UK was seen to offer fresh possibilities and to expand experiences.

The UK was viewed as excelling at the **student experience** it provides at all levels. In addition to greater cultural diversity and guaranteed accommodation, the education on offer and facilities available were

⁷ Some programmes such as medicine, architecture and art/performing arts consider interviews, performance and portfolios in addition to Leaving Certificate points, but while increasing, this is not the norm.

often perceived as of a higher standard. Higher rankings on league tables were also an important influence for students from Ireland.

An important long-term factor in decision making is **career prospects**. The Red Brick Research study notes that many respondents anticipated working in the UK after their studies and felt that a UK qualification might be more advantageous, and that their life in the UK after study could be more prosperous due to a higher quantity of career options at better companies.

Red Brick Research's study corroborates the presumption that **family or friends** living, studying or having previously studied in the UK influences the decision to consider the UK as a study destination.

Although not noted in the Red Brick Research study, research on outbound mobility from Ireland suggests that for those who wish to study overseas, but do not have a second language, the UK has always offered a clear advantage.⁸

⁸ There is some evidence to suggest that the significant increases in the availability of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes taught through the medium of English throughout Europe is attracting students from Ireland away from the UK and towards the Netherlands, Germany and Scandinavian countries. In a report for the British Council, StudyPortals reported that prospective students from Ireland show significant interest in the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Spain, Italy and France. *Please also see footnote 3 and section 4 below.*

4 Summary

For several decades significant numbers of students from Ireland have looked to England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for higher education study options. Although overall numbers have dropped over the last 10-15 years, applicant and enrollment levels appear to be recovering from sharp post-Brexit, post Covid-19 declines following the Irish and the British governments reaffirmation of their joint commitments under the CTA. This agreement provides assurances that students from Ireland will continue to qualify for 'home fee' status in the UK (and similarly that UK students will be treated as 'home/EU' students in Ireland).⁹

Latest figures from UCAS firmly indicate that applicants from Ireland to study in the UK at undergraduate level are again increasing. UCAS data for undergraduate applicants for the 2022 entry cycle (as of June 30th) show Ireland is the only major EU sending country to see an increase in applicants to the UK. Other EU and non-EU applicants have experienced opposite trends.

Figures on postgraduate applicants are not available, however HESA data indicates that 45 percent of students from Ireland are studying at postgraduate level, with absolute numbers increasing from 4,180 in 2017/18 to 4,440 in 2020/21. In the same period students from Ireland enrolled in undergraduate programmes declined from 5,555 to 5,340, suggesting a growing interest in opportunities for studies at higher levels, and as table 2 (p9) indicates, an interest in more highly ranked HEs.

An interesting finding has been the high number of female applicants. Over 70 percent of students from Ireland applying to study and enrolled in the UK are female. As noted above, HESA data suggests that this is largely explained by differences in field of study. Twenty percent of undergraduate students from Ireland in the 2020/21 academic year were studying subjects in the field of nursing, midwifery and allied health compared to just three percent of all international undergraduate students – these areas are currently female-dominated. Less is understood at this time about the choices of postgraduate students and why there has been such a sharp increase in female applicants at all levels over the last two years.

In common with international students from other countries, students from Ireland favour England as a destination, though at lower proportions (50 percent as opposed to 81 percent of all EU students). Proximity to and connections with Northern Ireland mean that 22 percent of students from Ireland in the UK study at Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast – overall the most favoured UK universities at all levels of study. Almost a quarter of students from Ireland choose to study in Scotland – again proximity and familiarity are important here, but also costs. The introduction of fees for students from Ireland in Scotland from 2021/22 may result in a shift in applicants away from Scotland from this point forward.

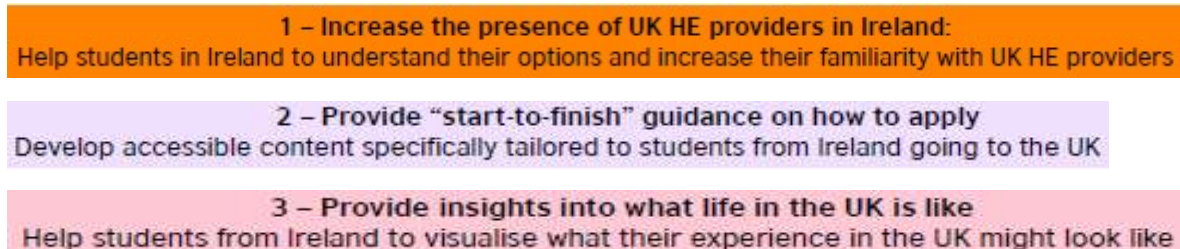
The broad range of high-quality programmes on offer, flexibility, specialist offerings, greater cultural diversity, an enhanced student experience and career/employment opportunities combine with factors such as proximity, language, ease of access and, importantly, accommodation availability to make the UK an attractive destination for students from Ireland. The Red Brick Research study also found that students or prospective students from Ireland favoured the UK's admission system UCAS over the CAO system, judging it as more holistic and fair.

The Red Brick Research study provides suggestions around how UK HEs can improve the experience for the prospective student from Ireland (*see report and figure 10 below*). Their findings emphasise the importance of improved and increased communication around UK HE providers, the UCAS system and life and cost of living in the UK. They note that students from Ireland felt they were somewhere in the

⁹ The Red Brick Research Study noted that Britain's exit from the EU and Covid-19 had limited spontaneous mentions, with students feeling they both had little impact on their decisions. (p23). It appears (from both respondent's comments and HESA and UCAS data), that Covid-19 was in the past, and that once fee levels were clarified and the CTA was confirmed, the UK's exit from the EU had no implications for their study.

middle of Home and International students. As a result, they can get forgotten about in communications and would like information to be more tailored to their situation (p33).

Figure 10: How British Council and UK HEIs Can Better Connect with Prospective Students from Ireland

- 
- 1 – Increase the presence of UK HE providers in Ireland:**
Help students in Ireland to understand their options and increase their familiarity with UK HE providers
 - 2 – Provide “start-to-finish” guidance on how to apply**
Develop accessible content specifically tailored to students from Ireland going to the UK
 - 3 – Provide insights into what life in the UK is like**
Help students from Ireland to visualise what their experience in the UK might look like

Source: British Council Ireland Higher Education Undergraduate Mobility Iri to UK Qualitative Report, August 2022

5 Concluding Comments

An exploration of recent UCAS and HESA data combined with the findings of the Red Brick Research study suggests that there is reason to be optimistic around Ireland's continued potential as a provider of students to UK HE providers. Emerging trends suggest that Ireland is close to ranking as one of the UK's most important EU source countries for international students.

In addition to ensuring students from Ireland have timely access to information and support around navigating the UCAS system, the following trends (both ongoing and emerging) should continue to be monitored to ensure an optimal and dynamic approach to promotion and recruitment emerges:

- It is important to understand the tertiary-level offerings in Ireland and the higher education landscape: where bottlenecks exist, what is changing, what students from Ireland are studying in the UK and why there is a sharp increase in female applicants and enrollments. This may help to target specific programmes and qualifications for promotion.¹⁰
- HESA figures show a growing interest from students from Ireland pursuing postgraduate studies in the UK. It appears that for higher level research, students from Ireland focus on highly ranked institutions, however further research (especially on fields of study) is required to understand and the implications of this trend.
- A further consideration to monitor here is the impact of the UK's decision to leave the EU on research master's and PhD applicants. PhD candidates, with an eye to EU funding and partnerships for future research projects, may in future look more favourably upon EU countries for high level studies.
- When it comes to course choice it may be that those courses requiring the highest CAO points in Ireland are often those where Irish students may choose to study in the UK as an alternative. There may also have been possible Covid-impacts on Irish students studying in the UK as grades may have proved a further factor in decision-making.
- Outbound mobility through Erasmus+ (which extends beyond the EU) is growing very rapidly in Ireland (in 2021/22 8,700 applications were received, up from 5,500 in 2020/21), and this may serve to influence students to look beyond English-speaking destinations for postgraduate studies. Paired with this trend, Ireland's new International Education, Research and Innovation Strategy will place a strong focus on European mobility, including supporting the [Languages Connect Policy](#) to ensure a greater focus on language learning at second level as an enabler of future outbound mobility beyond English speaking destinations at tertiary level.¹¹
- As noted above, outbound mobility data beyond Erasmus+ is not presently publicly available in Ireland, but there is growing evidence that increasing numbers of students from Ireland are being attracted to studying in the EU as the numbers of both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes being offered through English increases. StudyPortals data (in a report commissioned by the British Council) shows that prospective students from Ireland show significant interest in the Netherlands, Germany, Sweden, Spain, Italy and France. For the Netherlands, Ireland is now the 13th most important sending country with student numbers jumping from 782 in 2017/18 to 2,017 in 2021/22.¹²

¹⁰ The data shows for example the prominence of nursing and allied health programmes for students from Ireland. As noted above programmes in several of these disciplines offer limited places and are oversubscribed in Ireland at this time resulting in prohibitively high entry levels.

¹¹ See: Government of Ireland (2022): International education, research and innovation strategy consultation paper, downloadable from: <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/26324-international-education-research-and-innovation-strategy-public-consultation/>

¹² Source: NUFFIC - <https://www.nuffic.nl/en/subjects/facts-and-figures/countries-of-origin>. Accessed May 2022.

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- Ireland's international education strategies have always reflected a North-South and East-West dimension and have recognised the deep and enduring relationship between Ireland and the UK. The latest Strategy is under development at present and the government's '[Consultation Paper on Ireland's International Education, Research and Innovation Strategy](#)' notes the value of the CTA for both Ireland and Britain. The new strategy will have a strong focus on research and innovation and in this context, there is emphasis upon maintaining relationships with England while deepening bilateral relationships with the devolved governments of Wales and Scotland. The Shared Island Initiative and the EU Peace Plus programmes include funding for academic relationships, research and mobility across the Island.

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