

Higher Education Mobility Research: Ireland to UK

Conducted by Red Brick Research

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Respondent Profile and Research Objectives

Research Objectives

Research Background

- Supporting Higher Education connections between the UK and Ireland, as well as student mobility from Ireland to the UK, are priorities for both the British Embassy in Ireland and the British Council Ireland.
- With Covid-19 and the UK's exit from the EU, UK HE providers need to understand the behaviours and attitudes of students in Ireland: how these might have changed, and what this means for student recruitment from Ireland to the UK.
- Research is required to provide insight into the student journey from Ireland to the UK, to inform approaches / messaging to support future recruitment of students from Ireland to UK HE providers.
- Project funding has initially focussed on Ireland to UK student mobility because of funding constraints.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this research is to explore student mobility from Ireland to UK Higher Education providers (HE providers). The research seeks to:

- Understand choice of the UK as a study destination (see pages 10 – 22)
- Assess any impact of the UK's exit from the EU or Covid-19 (see page 23)
- Explore specific HE selection (see page 25)
- Examine any preference towards individual UK nations (see page 26)
- Determine how UK HE providers can attract and deliver for students from Ireland (see pages 30 - 33)

Respondent Profile and Methodology

Method

Online depth interviews were conducted with prospective and current UK students from Ireland between 23rd February – 15th March 2022. In total there were **30 interviews** conducted with **10 current students** and **20 prospective students**. Findings between these 2 audiences were consistent, and as such they have been reported on collectively.

- 11x Male and 19x Female
- 24x Irish and 6x Ethnically Diverse
- 15x Priority Institution*

A broad range of subjects were covered, including:

Subjects allied to Medicine
Law
Business Management
Football Coaching
Economics
Media and Journalism
Sciences (Biological, Mathematical, Physical, Computer, Engineering)

www.britishcouncil.org

Students applying / studying in each UK nation



* Priority institutions include those in the UK most applied to by students from Ireland (Ulster University, Queens University Belfast, The University of Edinburgh, Cardiff University, University of Glasgow, University of Manchester and Queen Margaret University)

Executive Summary

Key Findings (1 of 2)



Objective 1: Understand choice of the UK as a study destination

- **Why do students look outside of Ireland?**

Students looked outside of Ireland for HE because of costs/availability of student accommodation, uncertainty relating to the CAO points systems, and because of some course options currently unavailable in Ireland.

- **What prompts them to consider the UK?**

Many have existing connections to the UK with family / friends living or studying in the country, and these are often important influencers in consideration of the UK as a study destination.

- **What advantages is the UK seen to offer?**

- A broader variety of course options (including the option to study Joint Honours)
- Modern learning facilities
- Well-ranked programmes offering strong employment prospects
- Enriching extra-curricular opportunities, and exposure to new people and places
- Affordable, easy to travel to and culturally similar



Objective 2: Assess any impact of the UK's exit from the EU or Covid-19

- The UK's exit from the EU has had little impact on students' perceptions of the UK as a study destination, primarily because fees for students from Ireland have been unaffected.
- Similarly, there has been little impact from Covid-19 with most feeling the worst of the pandemic is behind us

Key Findings (2 of 2)



Objective 3: Explore specific HE provider selection

- Factors driving HE provider choice include personal recommendations, ranking / reputation, module options, location, and financial considerations including course fees, accommodation costs and the local cost of living, as well as the likelihood of finding a suitable part-time job in the local area.



Objective 4: Examine any preference towards individual UK nations

- While students do have differing perceptions of individual UK nations, this is unlikely to lead decision-making with choices driven by course / institution ahead of the wider region.
- Northern Ireland is seen as 'closer to home', which is an advantage for some but a turn-off for others. Scotland is perceived to have stronger cultural links to Ireland (perhaps related to Celtic football), while England is seen to offer advantages in terms of major cities with diverse populations and rich opportunities. Students were less knowledgeable about Wales overall.



Objective 5: Determine how UK HE providers can attract and deliver for students from Ireland

- There is demand for more information specifically tailored to students coming to the UK from Ireland to help guide them through the process and to answer the questions and concerns they have along the way. The next slide outlines the key recommendations for UK HE providers and the British Council to better deliver for students in the future.

Key Recommendations:

The British Council and UK HE providers can both better support the mobility of students from Ireland to the UK in the future; at present, students from Ireland feel they sit between what UK HE providers recognise as ‘Home’ and ‘International’ students, and that there is a gap for content which is better tailored to their unique situation. Based on student feedback, Red Brick suggest 3 main ways in which student mobility can be supported:

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 by:

1. Boosting the number of school visits from representatives of UK HE providers / UK Alumni from Ireland
2. Increasing the online visibility of UK universities in Ireland (e.g. through targeted campaigns on social media)
3. Hosting online / in-person events to promote the possibility of UK study to students in Ireland

2 – Provide “start-to-finish” guidance on how to apply

Develop accessible content* specifically tailored to students from Ireland going to the UK explaining:

1. The UCAS system and how it works
2. How to write a personal statement, and examples of good ones
3. How Irish points translate into the UK system
4. Fees for students from Ireland, and the financial assistance they are eligible for in the UK

** There is existing content provided by UCAS that students can be signposted to.*

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 by:

1. Sharing stories from current / previous students from Ireland
2. Providing detail on aspects of day-to-day student life, e.g. cost-of-living, part-time job opportunities for students, public transport etc.
3. Providing virtual tours and video content to help students get a feel for university campuses / UK regions if they’re unable to visit

For more information see slides 30 - 33.

Why do students from Ireland choose to study in the UK?

‘Push factors’ that encourage students to study outside of Ireland

There are certain factors about studying in Ireland which push students to consider studying internationally and make the UK a strong option



Lack of affordable accommodation



Many say accommodation, particularly around Dublin, is expensive and raises the cost of studying in Ireland dramatically. Some would have to live at home.



Uncertainty of CAO points system

The CAO points system deters some students from applying to university in Ireland due to the fact that entry requirements are subject to change.



Limited course options

Availability of specialist and Joint Honours courses encourages students with a specific path in mind to look elsewhere.

“ If I was to get accommodation, Dublin, I'd be like at least 10,000 Euro a year, whereas my accommodation here is either 3,000 or 4,000 which is a lot cheaper. And then, on top of that the UK system I find was a lot easier to use than the CAO system. - Prospective Student ”

“ There's no personal statement, there's no reference, there's no putting in previous results. It works solely based on a point system, which is just the results you get from your leaving cert...**I can't stress how much better UCAS is.** - Prospective Student ”

‘Pull factors’ that attract students from Ireland to study in the UK

Students consider a number of factors when exploring the possibility of moving to the UK to study

1 – Personal Connections

Students are often introduced to the idea of studying in the UK by a friend or family member. It is common for family members to live in the UK now after studying in the UK, or to know of people from their school who moved to the UK.

2 - Studying

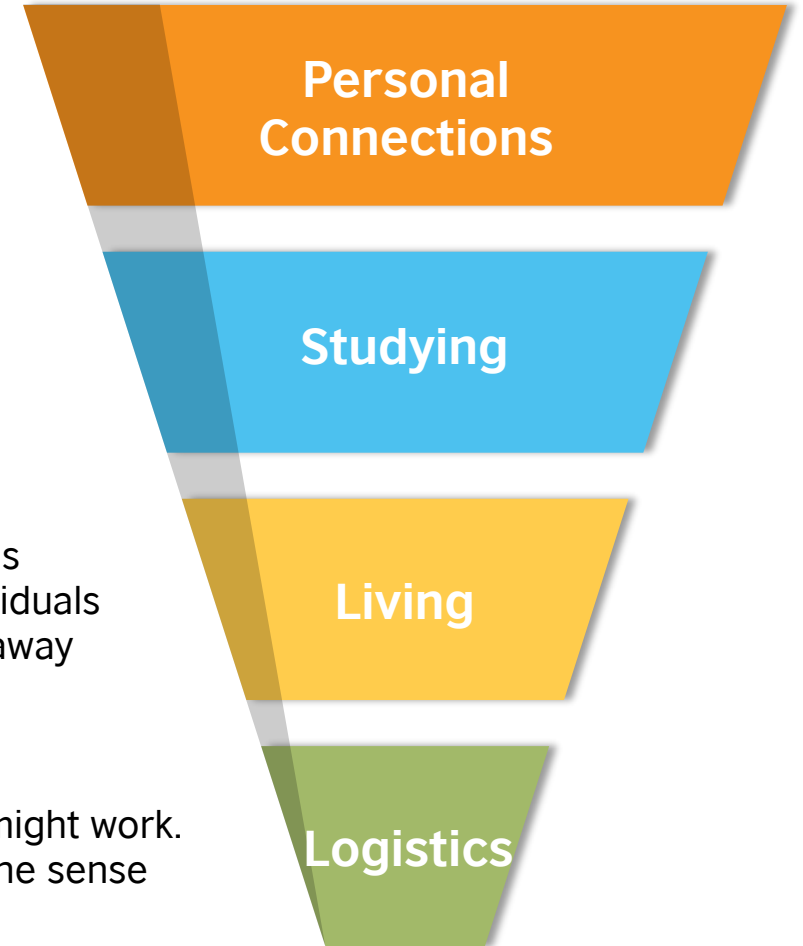
Upon researching the UK, students discover there is a large variety of courses in the UK compared to Ireland. The ability to do Joint Honours and complete more specialist courses that are less competitive than Ireland, is appealing for students.

3 - Living

The offer from UK universities of guaranteed accommodation in their first year, as well as numerous options for subsequent years of study, really appeals to students. These individuals are keen to have their own independence and experience something new, which living away from home will provide them with.

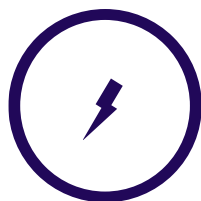
4 - Logistics

Upon confirming steps 1-3, students begin to imagine and plan how their life in the UK might work. The excellent travel links with Ireland and the cultural similarities play a role, as well as the sense they'd be able to find a local job to work whilst studying.



Not only do personal connections inspire consideration of the UK, they also reassure students that the UK is a viable and 'safe' option

Friends / family inspire consideration of the UK



Personal connections are often the **initial spark** for considering the UK as a study destination, with many referring to friends and family members already living or studying in the UK as a key influence and a decisive factor in their decision to study in the UK.

Friends / family are prominent influencers



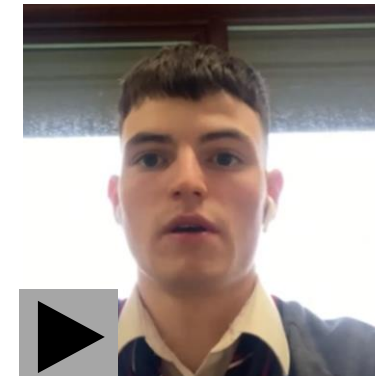
Family and friends have been found to be **far more influential** in decision-making than we usually see on other projects focusing on prospective students.

Existing UK connections provide a 'safety net'



Having family and friends based in the UK **offered reassurance** if anything were to go wrong and **reduced the effects of home sickness**.

“(Family) was a really big deciding factor. My immediate family, and then my extended family who are in universities in the UK. - Current Student”



“I have family members (in the UK). My older cousins went to school in the UK too, and they loved it. So that's what prompted me to study in the UK, and some of my friends as well that already study in the UK. - Current Student”

“My aunt and my uncle both live in England, and I wouldn't necessarily be living with them, but it would be nice to know that I have at least some familial connections within the actual country. - Prospective Student”

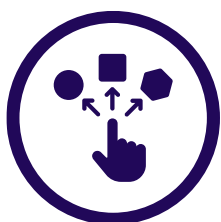
Students perceive study advantages in the UK vs Ireland, favouring the UCAS application system and valuing the breadth of courses available

Perceived advantages of the UCAS system



The UCAS system was not an initial trigger for considering the UK, but a **contributor positively cementing the UK as a strong option early-on** in the minds of many students living in Ireland. The opportunity to provide a **personal statement and go through an interview** for some courses was a unique and appealing process, the appeal largely stemming from students getting to submit a **more holistic and well-rounded** application and **'sell themselves' on more than just grades** as in Ireland.

Wide variety of course options including Joint Honours



Variety of course options in the UK drew many students to start seriously considering the UK as an alternative to studying in Ireland. Many stated that they were made aware of the range of options within the UK **through their school guidance counsellor and more generally word of mouth** from family and friends. Students were drawn in by the **option of Joint Honours degrees** and more **specialist degrees** such as Radiography and Podiatry which either weren't available in Ireland, or were perceived to be less competitive in the UK.

“

*I think for me, mainly, it's just the wider variety of courses in the UK. They've got so many more joint bachelor degrees, which is what I was looking at, more so than a singular focus. -
Prospective Student*

”

Students also believe the UK is better placed to offer modern study facilities / equipment, and high-quality courses delivering enhanced career prospects for the future

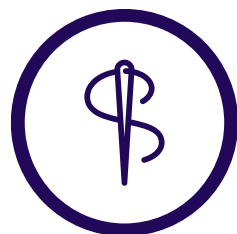
Modern learning facilities



For students studying a more “hands-on” course (e.g. Medicine), they spoke especially about **university facilities** in relation to this, feeling that UK universities were **more modern and offer them better opportunities**. There were fewer universities in Ireland offering their course.

“ The facilities in Ireland weren’t great. I was looking at CT machines and how new their equipment was. The equipment at the university in Ireland was behind what hospitals were using on my placement.
– Prospective student ”

Highly ranked courses / well-regarded qualifications

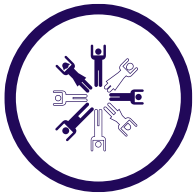


Students felt the ability to **tailor their courses**, combined with these courses performing higher in the league tables compared to Irish equivalents, meant the UK was an attractive option. For many, performing better on the league tables was linked to **more prosperous career options after graduating** (especially if remaining in the UK).



Living in the UK is perceived to offer cultural diversity and more opportunities for new experiences

Diverse student and local populations



The **cultural diversity** of the UK, particularly within larger cities such as **London, Edinburgh and Birmingham**, was cited by many as an exciting prospect, and something which got them initially looking into the UK as an option.

Exposure to new people and places



Much of the appeal of studying in the UK was rooted in the drive for students wanting to **meet new people, create new memories and enjoy new experiences**. There was a feeling amongst some that this would not be as possible if they were to stay and study in Ireland. Many felt that if they were to study in Ireland, they would likely continue with people they already knew and would be seeing and doing things they have already done.

“ They have a lot more clubs and societies than there are in Ireland. It is a lot more social, I love how much choice there is. –
Prospective student ”

Students are swayed by the guarantee of student accommodation in the UK, and believe they will be able to embrace a fuller university experience away from home

Better prospects for securing student accommodation



The **variety of accommodation** offered by UK universities, and the guarantee of it in their first year, really swayed some students. The expense and rarity of accommodation in Ireland really worried students, who placed a lot of importance on meeting new people and being **immersed in their student experience**.

An enriching extra-curricular experience



Students from Ireland are keen to immerse themselves in their experience, with university societies seen as a way to make friends and build a sense of community. The **cultural similarities** between UK students and students from Ireland made students feel more at ease, and confident that they'd achieve this (with opportunities to join societies being helpful).

“The accommodations are great with UK universities. It’s a big thing here (Ireland) that our accommodation is extremely expensive. It’s still cheaper (to come to the UK), even with the flights. – Prospective student”



The UK being far away enough for new experiences, but still familiar, puts it ahead of other international options

Ease of travel



Travel links are a key consideration for many when deciding where to study. The UK ticks this box by offering **multiple ways to travel back to Ireland** (air and sea) with **minimal travel time**, making it more appealing in this respect compared with the US and Asia. Ease of internal travel within the UK, e.g. train / bus links, also appeal.

“ I like in the event that I had to go home for whatever reason, I'm only an hour and a half away, so it's just very convenient for travel.
– Prospective student ”

Financially viable



The **fees** associated with coming to study in the UK appeal to students coming from Ireland with many stating that the difference to studying in Ireland is **negligible once accommodation and living costs are factored in**. Higher tuition fees are mitigated by lower accommodation costs and felt to be justified by a **high standard of teaching and qualification**. Additionally, students felt confident they'd be able to find a job locally whilst studying, giving them confidence in their decision to study in the UK.

“ I still have that sense of familiarity but with the UK I have the right environment for opportunities as well.
– Prospective Student ”

Cultural familiarity



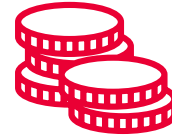
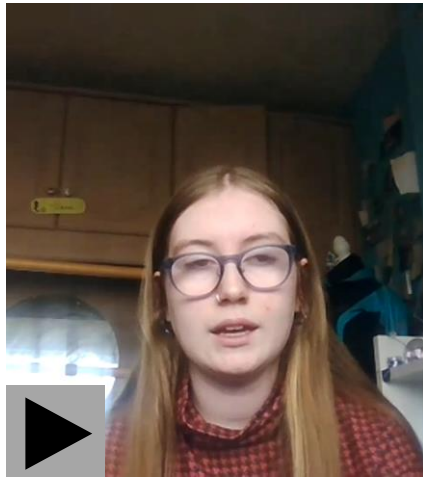
The **shared English language** placed the UK above other European options. Sharing both **cultural similarities and spoken language put students at ease**, whilst family ties in the UK reassured students of an **accessible support network** if required.

Barriers to students from Ireland considering UK study

A lack of readily accessible information – particularly with regard to funding – can create questions and concerns about UK study

A **lack of information** around unfamiliar processes and systems is one of the biggest barriers students from Ireland face when considering studying in the UK. Students found that they had **various questions** throughout the application process and that **answers and clarification were not always easy to find**.

There are 2 main areas that students from Ireland are likely to worry about:



1. Finances and eligibility for funding

Finance is a top-of-mind concern for prospective students wherever they plan to study. These concerns are **exacerbated** for students from Ireland considering UK study due to a **lack of knowledge around funding provision**, i.e. which loans / financial aid they are eligible for. Uncertainty around the comparative cost of living in the UK vs Ireland is also common.

While students' concerns were ultimately overcome, the information needed often **took a while to find**.



2. Lack of familiarity with UK HE providers, leading to 'fear of the unknown'

Due to a general **lack of exposure** to UK universities in Ireland, most students were only aware of a handful of UK universities prior to commencing their research. This **lack of local knowledge** made some unsure about whether they were applying to the correct university or not, and for some this extended into **concerns about how well they'd integrate into a new community and how happy they'd be at university**.

The UK's exit from the EU and Covid-19 had limited mentions, with students reporting that both had little impact on their decisions

The UK's exit from the EU was not seen to have any implications on their studies

“ It didn't influence my decision after I knew the fee increases wouldn't affect me – Prospective student ”

- **No impact on fees:** Students thought of Britain's exit from the EU solely in relation to their study fees, and felt that because they were still eligible for the same fees paid by UK students, Britain's exit from the EU would not have implications for their studies.
- **Not influenced perceptions of the UK:** Students reported that Britain's exit from the EU had not changed their perceptions of the UK as a place to live or study. There was a sense that it “has already happened”, and that students had not noticed a difference since it occurred.

Covid-19 was not considered a problem or a factor

“ I think one of the best advantages that Covid brought is that a lot of this stuff is online now...there is a bigger online presence – Prospective student ”

- **Perception that the worst of the pandemic is behind us:** Students were not concerned about how Covid-19 might affect their studies, and generally felt that it was “over” and we were out of the worst of it now. There were no specific findings per UK nation.
- **Greater influence while researching options:** Some commented how it made research harder as they couldn't visit universities in person – however, others were glad for this as it meant the quality and quantity of online resources had improved.

**How do students from
Ireland choose a UK
institution to study
with?**

Once an interest in studying in the UK is established, students typically prioritise the following factors when choosing a specific HE provider:



Course & Modules

Students in Ireland typically create a shortlist of UK universities which offer their **desired course and modules**. Students are intrigued by the numerous course offerings in the UK, and the ability to study Joint Honours.



Personal recommendations

Personal recommendations play an important role in narrowing down students' shortlists. **Guidance counsellors, family, friends and colleagues** all contribute.



Academic standing

Students typically consult league tables and the course rankings to ascertain the **academic standing of each of their considerations**.



Location

Students want to know about the local area and how it differs from home: **local amenities, accommodation, activities and cost of living**. They consider whether they want to live in a big city or somewhere more rural.



Financial viability

Students also consider **financial viability** – primarily course fees but also accommodation and weekly living costs, dependent on the area, local job prospects and the information available to inform these decisions.

“ It was mainly the courses that drew me to UK unis in particular places more so than anything else. I wanted to do Classics and English together, or Classics and Psychology. And that's very niche.
- Prospective Student ”

“ Cost of living and accommodation fees. Compared with the rest of my options, this is the most affordable place to live. accommodation costs are minimal, coming from Dublin.
- Current Student ”

While different nations of the UK appeal in different ways, choice of HE provider is unlikely to be driven by nation

Northern Ireland:

Northern Ireland has the appeal of being closer to home, making it feel like less of a jump for some more nervous students. Others felt it was “too close to home”.

Scotland:

There is a perception of closer cultural ties between Scotland and Ireland (references made to Celtic football). Ease of travel and the possibility of 4-year courses are also attractors.



Wales:

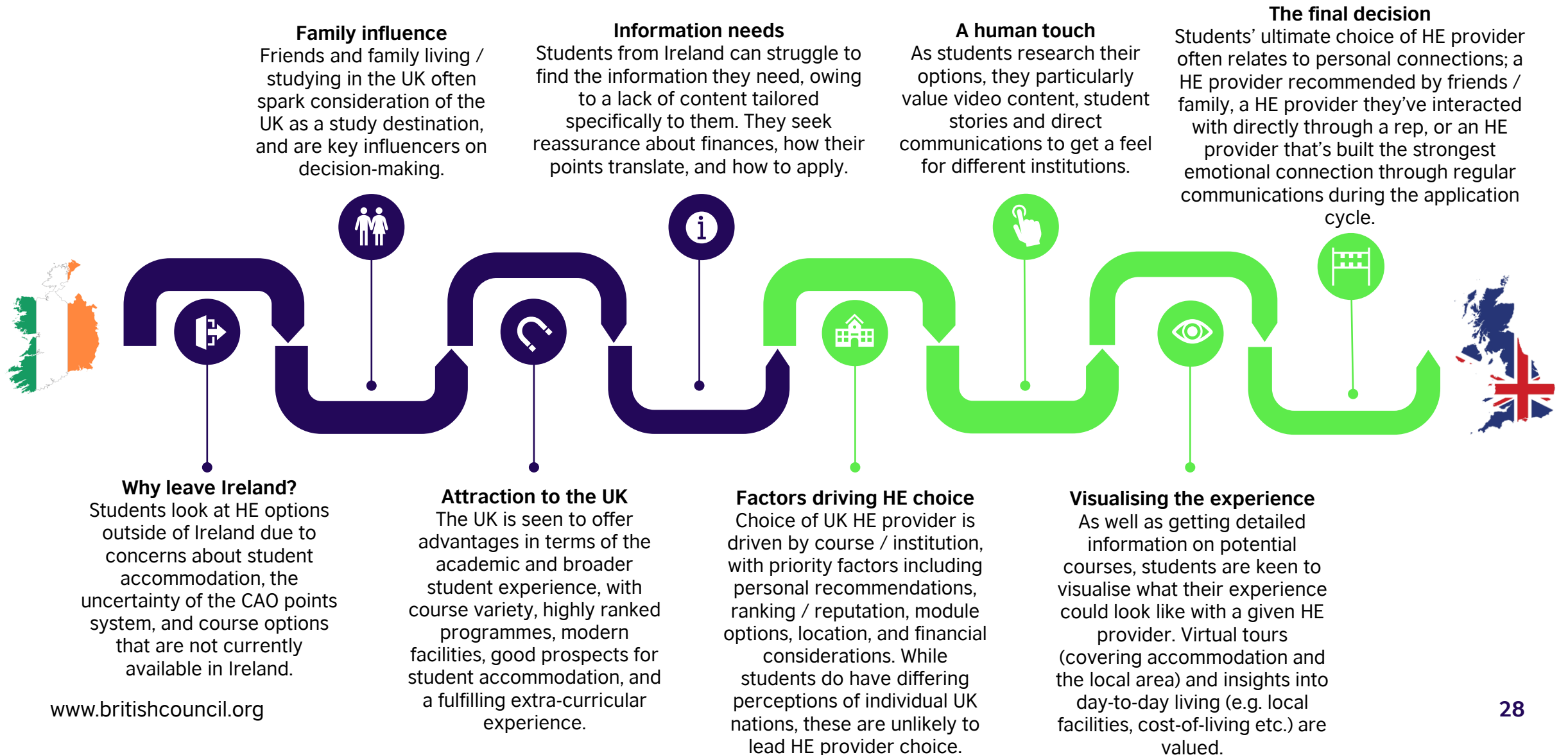
Amongst students from Ireland interviewed, participants tended to lack knowledge about Wales, and particularly those who didn't already have a university in mind.

England:

Students are more likely to have visited England than other nations, and to have friends or family in England. Appeal largely relates to major cities and the diversity and opportunity they provide.

In summary:
**The student journey from
Ireland to the UK**

The student journey from Ireland to the UK:



Students experience 5 “pain points” in their application journey, where the British Council and UK HE providers could offer better support

UCAS System

Students commented that the **UCAS system is very different to the CAO**, it is much more thorough and detailed. Many are confused by what a personal statement should include or how it should be written, and struggle to find guidance on both of these.

Points system differences

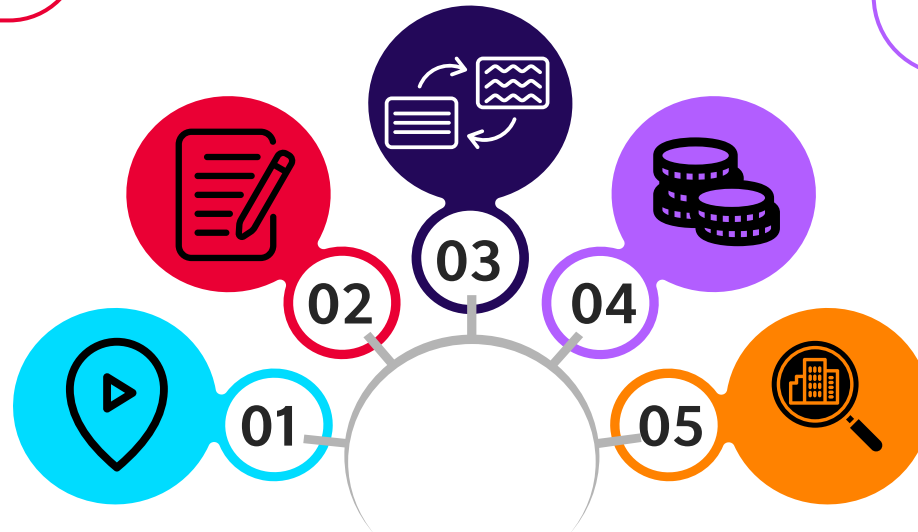
The **points system causes much confusion** for students. They comment how it is very different in Ireland, and often their teachers, friends or family don't understand how their points translate into the UK points system.

Financial Confusion

Finance is also a confusing area for students. They are unsure on the cost of living in various parts of the UK, and how this differs to Ireland. There is also confusion over what financial aid they are eligible for, with some commenting that they were never quite certain until a university confirmed their place.

Where to start

For students who don't have a personal connection to the UK, they **lack information about how to apply or where to start**. Some teachers and schools know little about this, so for these students the process of applying to the UK can be confusing and stressful.



Information on Living in the UK

Many students had numerous questions about **what life would be like in the UK** that they felt they couldn't find information on. They wanted to know how the university would help them adapt – for example student support, or hearing from other international students.

What recommendations are there for the British Council, and UK HE providers, to better attract and deliver for students from Ireland?

Key Recommendations:

The British Council and UK HE providers can both better support the mobility of students from Ireland to the UK in the future; at present, students from Ireland feel they sit between what UK HE providers recognise as 'Home' and 'International' students, and that there is a gap for content which is better tailored to their unique situation. There are 3 main ways in which student mobility can be supported, which will be covered in detail over the next 3 slides.

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 by:

a) Boosting the number of school visits from representatives of UK HE providers / UK Alumni from Ireland

The majority approach friends and family for advice, but those who had interaction with a rep from a HE provider really valued this. Most did not know much about UK HE providers or where to start researching, so having a name in mind or a direct experience helped to give that HE provider an edge.

Whilst few were visited by reps, for those that were it was often the initial trigger that sparked consideration of UK study.

b) Increasing the online visibility of UK universities in Ireland (e.g. through targeted campaigns on social media)

Social media was a prominent resource for many during their research, with many drawn to adverts for UK HE providers seen on Instagram / Facebook. Students gained exposure to courses / HE providers they may not otherwise have considered.

Social media also provides a channel for more direct, human interaction with a HE provider which can help students form more emotional connections with HE providers.

c) Hosting online / in-person events to promote the possibility of UK study to students in Ireland

Students wanted online events to be able to get a feel for a HE provider without the expense of travelling to the UK and back.

In-person events in Ireland (e.g. UK HE fairs / taster events) would also help students to recognise UK study as an option and to familiarise themselves with potential UK HE providers. The provision of such events would also signal that UK HE providers are interested in students from Ireland.

Key Recommendations:

2 – Provide “start-to-finish” guidance on how to apply

Develop accessible content specifically tailored to students from Ireland going to the UK explaining:

- a) The UCAS system and how it works
 - b) How to write a personal statement, and examples of good ones
 - c) How Irish points translate into the UK system
 - d) Fees for students from Ireland, and the financial assistance they are eligible for in the UK
- a) Students wanted an overview of the whole UCAS application process so they could track their progress and ensure they have met all the requirements to apply to study in the UK. Some mentioned a timeline with milestones which you could tick off may be useful for this.
 - b) Students wanted more information about what to include in a personal statement. Most wanted this directly from the university website so they could tailor it, but they commented that guidance was hard to find online.
 - c) Students would have liked more consistency from HE providers in defining how the CAO system translates to their entry system. They commented that some HE providers supplied this, but others did not which made them worried they’d worked it out wrong.
 - d) Students would like regular check-ins from UK HE providers once they have applied, and valued institutions who do this already. They’d like to have the fee structure confirmed back to them, as well as general status updates and check-ins. Students who had received more information on eligibility for student loans or financial aid were at much more ease with the prospect of studying in the UK.

Key Recommendations:

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 by:

a) Sharing stories from current / previous students from Ireland via YouTube videos and blogs

Students favoured these as it gave them an honest and unbiased view of the university, and often allowed them to easily visualise their life there through the eyes of a student.



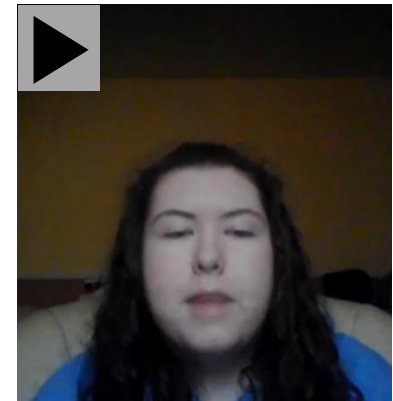
b) Providing detail on aspects of day-to-day student life, e.g. cost-of-living, part-time job opportunities for students, public transport etc.

There were several aspects of life in the UK which students were unsure on, namely around the cost of living and the “practical” adaptations they’d need to make. For example, how much is the weekly shop likely to cost? Would they need a new mobile phone? How do they book train tickets? What student-friendly opportunities are available locally for part-time work?

“ The University of Lancaster had a virtual tour where you could go round the facilities and the different rooms and see what it had to offer. I’m very musical so to have areas where I can be myself or pursue my extracurriculars is important. I feel like that attracted me to it much more, I made it my first choice. - Prospective Student ”

c) Providing virtual tours and video content to help students get a feel for university campuses / UK regions if they’re unable to visit

Students found these immersive and helpful, and they added an extra layer to their research of really understanding what life in the UK would look like.



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