

Policy Insight

Higher Education Mobility

UK Ireland

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British Council is registered as a charity (since 2011)
with Charities Regulator Ireland (registration number 20100360).

British Council Ireland, British Embassy in Dublin, Red Brick
Research, & Southern Cross Consulting. (2023).
Higher Education Mobility: UK Ireland. British Council.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57884/vv6r-7a67>



**British Embassy
Dublin**

Contents

Foreword	4
1 Executive Summary	5
1.1 Key Findings: Ireland to UK student flows	6
1.2 Key Findings: UK to Ireland student flows	8
2 Methodology	11
2.1 Ireland to UK Flows: Respondent Profile and Methodology	12
2.2 UK to Ireland Flows: Respondent Profile and Methodology	13
2.3 Contextual analysis of quantitative data	14
3 Ireland to the UK: Students from Ireland choosing the UK as a HE destination	15
3.1 Why do students from Ireland choose to study in the UK?	25
3.2 Barriers to students from Ireland considering UK study	28
3.3 How do students from Ireland choose a UK institution to study with?	29
3.4 Summary: The student journey from Ireland to the UK	30
4 UK to Ireland: Students from the UK choosing Ireland as a HE destination	31
4.1 Why do students from the UK choose to study in Ireland?	42
4.2 Barriers to students from the UK considering Ireland as a study destination	47
4.3 Perceptions and the appeal of UK HE Providers	48
4.4 Summary: The student journey from the UK to Ireland	49
5 Summary and Recommendations	51

Foreword

This research reports on higher education mobility between Ireland and the UK.

The flow of students between the UK and Ireland is not well documented, nor well understood. This research study aims to address this by analysing patterns and trends on available data (since 2017), as well as provide insight on the influencing factors on student choice between the UK and Ireland.

It will be of interest to those engaged in higher education and student recruitment, and those working in a policy context relating to higher education in the UK and Ireland.

Please note, the research was conducted at two different points in time by two different companies. Therefore, while we endeavoured to replicate the same conditions, questions and sentiment in both research studies, there have been necessary adjustment for geographical focus and data availability. We also recognise that the study has limitations and would benefit from greater numbers of interviewees from Scotland and Wales in the second (UK to Ireland) research study. None the less, we felt the insights available were important findings and useful to disseminate, particularly as there has been so little research to date on this subject.

This research is also accompanied by a *Higher Education Information Guide: UK Ireland* offering students (and universities) useful information on higher education mobility between the UK and Ireland.

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Nonetheless, we felt the insights available, were important findings and useful to disseminate, particularly as there has been so little research to date on this subject.

1. Executive Summary

1. Executive summary

This report is comprised of two qualitative research studies on higher education between the UK and Ireland. The first explores student mobility from Ireland to the UK; the second, from the UK to Ireland. These studies were jointly commissioned in 2021 and 2022 by British Council Ireland and the British Embassy in Dublin.

In addition to this, the research also tracks patterns and trends in student mobility between the UK and Ireland since 2017.

1.1 Key Findings: Ireland to UK student flows

The following outlines some key findings in relation to student mobility from Ireland to the UK. A number of factors are highlighted that drive higher education choice for students. These include personal recommendations, module options, location, and financial considerations:

- Key push factors are lack of affordable housing; uncertainty around CAO points system; limited course options.
- Key pull factors are personal connections such as friends and family; availability of accommodation in first year, and subsequent years.
- UK institutions are considered to have a broader variety of course options for students to choose from, including the option to study a greater variety of Joint Honours programmes.
- The facilities of UK universities are a big draw for many students, particularly those hoping to study more 'hands-on' courses such as medicine and engineering.
- The UK's globally well-ranked undergraduate programmes offer strong employment prospects through industry connections.
- Extra-curricular opportunities such as a wide variety of societies are appealing to students from Ireland and offer an opportunity to meet new people.
- The UK is perceived as culturally similar and easy to travel to from Ireland, and also affordable.

This report comprises two research studies on higher education mobility: one between Ireland and the UK and the second, between the UK and Ireland.

While the decision to choose an individual UK nation is strongly driven by programme of study and institution reputation, some other interesting findings came through in the interviews:

- Northern Ireland is seen as ‘closer to home’, and this can be an advantage for some.
- Scotland is perceived to have strong cultural links to Ireland.
- England is seen to offer advantages in terms of major cities with diverse populations and rich opportunities.
- Students were generally less knowledgeable about Wales overall.

Key Recommendations

UK higher education providers and the British Council could support students from Ireland who would like to study in the UK by:

- Providing “start-to-finish” guidance on how to apply to study in the UK.
- Sharing insights into what life in the UK is like as a student.
- Developing accessible content specifically tailored to students from Ireland going to the UK including a detailed explanation of the UCAS system; provide guidance on how to write a personal statement including examples of best practice; how Irish Leaving Certificate points translate into the UK system; fee information for students from Ireland, including information on the financial assistance they are eligible for in the UK.

1.2 Key Findings: UK to Ireland student flows

The following outlines some key findings in relation to student mobility from the UK to Ireland. A number of factors are highlighted that drive student choice. These include affordability, ease of access and the value of Erasmus+.

- The proximity of the UK and the relative ease of access for university students both in terms of common language and lack of visas were pull factors.
- Students focussed on the value of access to Erasmus+ programmes, of living in an EU country and getting a degree from an EU university and on not having to worry about entry and exit visas.
- Relative tuition fee affordability featured in their decision making but this was counter-balanced by the higher cost of living and lack of housing availability.
- Students from the UK struggle with the CAO application system: its lack of clarity; the translation of A-Level results to Leaving Certificate points.
- In the context of the nationwide pressures on accommodation, the late offers has caused stress and resulted for some in decisions not to study in Ireland. For those who do take up their places they can face insecurity and an expensive period (with no loan or fee support) when searching for somewhere to live.
- Interviewees also noted the lack of clarity (which was perceived as inequitable) on the translation of A Level results to Leaving Certificate points, possibly placing them at a disadvantage compared to students from Ireland.
- A pull-factor for students from Northern Ireland is that they can access student loans to study in Ireland quite easily (which is not possible for students from England, Scotland or Wales). Further information is available through website [NI Direct](#).

Students considered higher education outside of the UK because of proximity and the relative ease of access

Key Recommendations

Policy makers and higher education providers in Ireland could better deliver for students from the UK in the future by:

- Providing “start-to-finish” guidance on how to apply to study in Ireland, tailored to students from the UK, including: a detailed explanation of the CAO system; the translation of A Levels to Leaving Cert points; the fees for students at various NFQ levels of education, and any financial assistance they are eligible for.
- Providing greater information on accommodation including dedicated housing provision for students, available lists and noticeboards, etc.
- Highlighting the importance of work placements and greater availability of Erasmus+ and other study abroad programmes in Ireland as this was seen as attractive.
- Students from Northern Ireland (who undertook their secondary schooling in Ireland) recommended that UK universities visit schools in Ireland, particularly along the border, highlighting their offers, showcasing the availability of accommodation and providing training on the UCAS system.
- Providing greater information on the cost of living and the availability of scholarships.¹

1

See Section 5: Summary and Recommendations, page 51, for more.



2. Methodology

2. Methodology

2.1 Ireland to UK Flows: Respondent Profile and Methodology

In February and March 2022, Redbrick Research conducted a qualitative research inquiry on higher education student flows between Ireland and the UK. This was carried out online between 23rd February and 15th March 2022. In total there were 30 interviews conducted with 10 current students and 20 prospective students. Findings between these two audiences were consistent, and as such they have been reported on collectively.

A demographic breakdown of the 30 participants interviewed can be found below:

- **11 Male and 19 Female participants**
- **24 Irish ethnicity and 6 other ethnicity**
- **15 participants from 'priority institutions'**
(*priority institutions include those in the UK most applied to by students from Ireland: Ulster University, Queen's University Belfast, The University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow and Queen Margaret University*).

The sample included a range of current students / applicants to each UK nation:

- **Northern Ireland: 3**
- **Scotland: 7**
- **Wales: 3**
- **England: 17**

A broad range of subject selections were covered, including:

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

A second research project was commenced in October 2022 and completed in March 2023. This second study explored flows of students from the UK to Ireland.

2.2 UK to Ireland Flows: Respondent Profile and Methodology

For the second undergraduate mobility research project a two-stage approach was taken by Southern Cross Consulting.

Stage one involved the administration of a short survey to UK students in publicly funded HE Providers in Ireland². The survey was administered with the assistance of the Irish Universities Association and the Technological Higher Education Association and four universities, two technological universities and one institute of technology participated, resulting in 59 acceptable responses. Matching the survey results to the profile of UK and NI students in Ireland, 20 current students were interviewed.

A demographic breakdown of the 20 participants interviewed can be found below:

- **5 Male and 15 Female participants**
- **10 White Irish/Northern Irish, 5 White English and 4 other ethnicity**
- **Students were from eight of the top ten priority higher education providers for UK students** (*Trinity College Dublin; University College Dublin; University of Galway; University College Cork; Dundalk Institute of Technology; Atlantic Technological University; Maynooth University and University of Limerick*).

The sample included a range of current students / applicants to each UK nation:

- **Northern Ireland: 10**
- **Wales: 1**
- **England: 9**

Students were interviewed in November and December 2022, with each interview lasting between 30 and 40 minutes. Interviews were guided by an agreed schema covering the three key research areas: decisions and motivations around choosing Ireland as a study destination; experience of studying and living in Ireland and views on how UK HE Providers could have attracted them. Interviews were conducted virtually and recorded (with the student's permission) and later analysed using transcribing software.

In conducting the interviews, it quickly became clear that students from England and students from Northern Ireland had very different reasons for studying in Ireland and therefore disaggregating the results by interviewee domicile proved essential.

2 There are twelve publicly funded universities in Ireland and two institutes of technology. There are also a number of other publicly funded institutions and private colleges.

2.3 Contextual analysis of quantitative data

In addition to the qualitative research, desktop research was also conducted on available quantitative data (since 2017) in order to provide some context to the qualitative research. This was in order to explore if any trends or patterns in student mobility are present. The quantitative analysis is located at the beginning of each of the qualitative sections (Section 3 and Section 4, which follow). At the beginning of each of these next sections, student data (enrolment, gender, geography etc.) is analysed (at undergraduate and postgraduate levels) in the UK between 2017 and 2023, and of students from the UK who choose to study in Ireland during the same period.³

3 Data comes from the following sources and was accessed in April and July 2022 and March 2023: The Universities and College Admission service (UK) [UCAS](#); The Higher Education Statistics Agency (UK) [HESA](#); The Higher Education Authority (Ireland) [HEA](#), and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, Institute for Statistics [UNESCO UIS](#).

3. Ireland to the UK:

Students from Ireland choosing the UK as a HE destination

3. Ireland to the UK

The UK has an unparalleled reputation for education and the proximity of the UK - its shared language and quality education system - have always been attractive to students from Ireland. The Common Travel Area⁴, which has its origins in a 1922 agreement between the UK, Crown Dependencies, and Ireland (and which was reaffirmed again in a Memorandum of Understanding in 2019) protects the movement of people across the borders of the UK and Ireland and guarantees the maintenance of associated reciprocal rights for citizens of both countries with respect to all levels of education, employment, healthcare and social benefits. While over half of Irish school leavers take up places in universities and colleges in Ireland, increasing numbers consider travelling beyond Ireland for their higher education experience.⁵ In 2021/22 the UK saw a decrease in student numbers from nine of the top 10. Ireland is the outlier here as figures 1 - 3 illustrate.

Enrolments

In 2014/15 students from Ireland (n=10,980) accounted for 2 percent of all international students and 9 percent of all EU students to the UK. By 2021/22 the total number of students from Ireland stood at 9,855 and account for approximately 1.5 percent of all international students and 6 percent of EU students in the UK. This 0.5 per cent decline could be explained by a number of factors, but the most significant factor within this time frame is the UK decision to leave to the EU – the uncertainty of which may have affected student choice despite the assurance provided by the Common Travel Area. Across the EU, changes to new student numbers show a significant decline, with 53% fewer first-year students in the UK from the EU compared with the previous academic year.⁶

The lack of clarity around employment rights for EU citizens, changes to visa requirements, increased tuition costs and limited 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. In 2021/22 the UK saw a decrease in student numbers from nine of the top 10. Ireland is the outlier here as figures 1 - 3 illustrate.

4 The Common Travel Area (CTA) protects the movement of people across the borders of the UK and Ireland and guarantees the maintenance of associated reciprocal rights for citizens of both countries with respect to all levels of education, employment, healthcare and social benefits.

5 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](#) for 2021 however shows the number as 2,017 (March 2023).

6 'In 2021/22, non-EU enrolments in British universities surged by 23.8% year-over-year, with new, first-year enrolments growing by 32%. By contrast, EU students in UK universities fell by 21.4% – and 53% fewer first-year students came from the EU compared with the previous academic year.' Source: ICEF Monitor, [Irish universities report significant post-Brexit uptick in EU applications and enrolments](#), 8 February 2023.

Ireland is now one of the most significant countries for UK higher education applicants. In January 2023, HESA announced their Statistical First Release for the 2021/22 academic year (January 19th 2023), providing data on students studying in the UK in that year. In 2021/22 academic year, Ireland became the UK's largest EU market for newly recruited students (4,415) ahead of France (4,355) and Germany (3,695). Up 11% on pre COVID (since 2019/20).

France down 34%, Germany down 42%. Most other EU countries exhibit declining enrolment and today Ireland stands as the 5th most important EU sending country for the UK in terms of total student numbers (figure 1).

For students from Ireland the clarity provided by the Irish and UK government's joint recommitment (reaffirmed by both governments in May 2019) to the [Common Travel Agreement](#) (CTA) provided assurances that students from Ireland continued to qualify for 'home fee' status in the UK and that no visa or related paperwork was required, thus helping to create a borderless perception between the two countries and undoubtedly influencing students from Ireland to continue to apply to UK universities.⁷

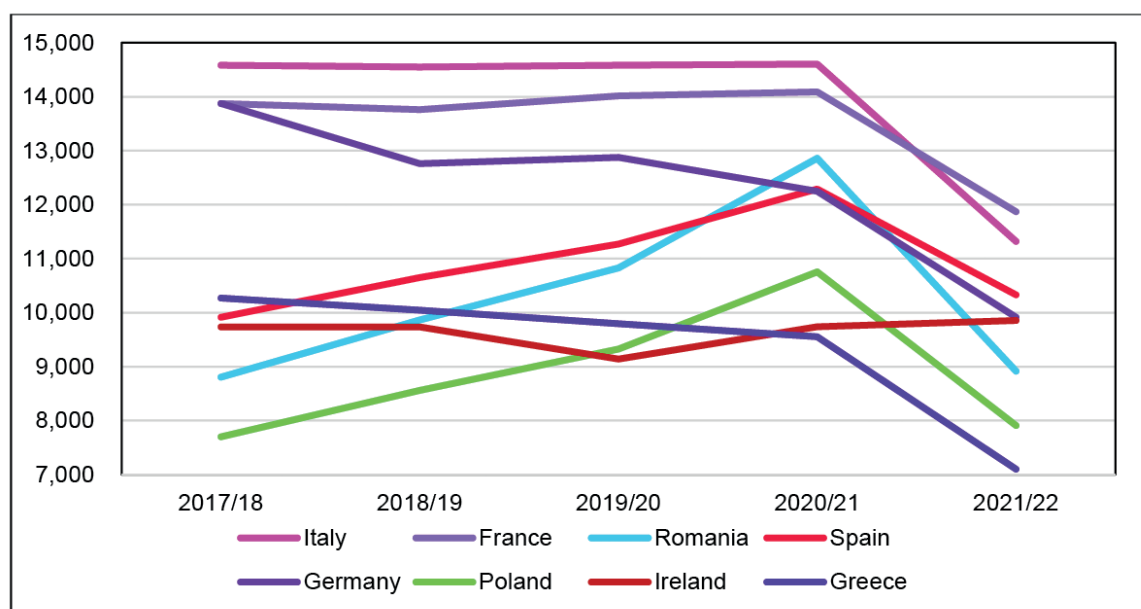


Figure 1: EU Enrolments in UK HE providers - top eight sending countries

Source: HESA - hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from#non-uk

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 is the first where students from Ireland are 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.

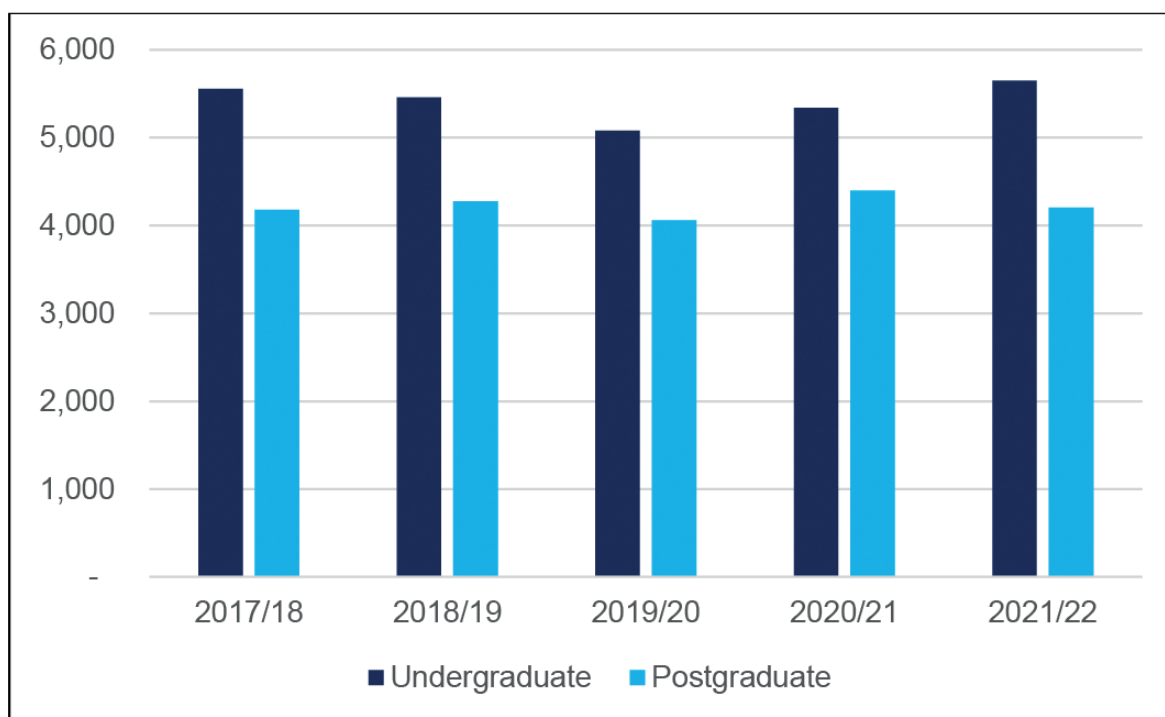


Figure 2: Students from Ireland in the UK - Level of Study (2017/18 - 2021/22)

Source: HESA: hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from#non-uk

Figure 2 illustrates the proportion of students from Ireland at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in the UK. Fifty seven percent (5,650) are studying at undergraduate level.

For the UK as a whole, there is evidence of a strong decline in EU postgraduate enrolments over the last five years, from 45,845 in 2017/18 to 33,715 in 2021/22. Figure 3 illustrates this pattern, showing data for the top eight EU sending countries. Again, as is noted with undergraduate enrolments, Ireland is the outlier here - the only EU country for which

postgraduate enrolments have not decreased in recent years, currently standing at 4,205 enrolments.

Of students from Ireland enrolled at postgraduate level ($n = 4,205$), 79 percent are taking 'taught' programmes and 21 percent are undertaking research programmes – available data does not disaggregate between research master's and PhD programmes (see figure 4).

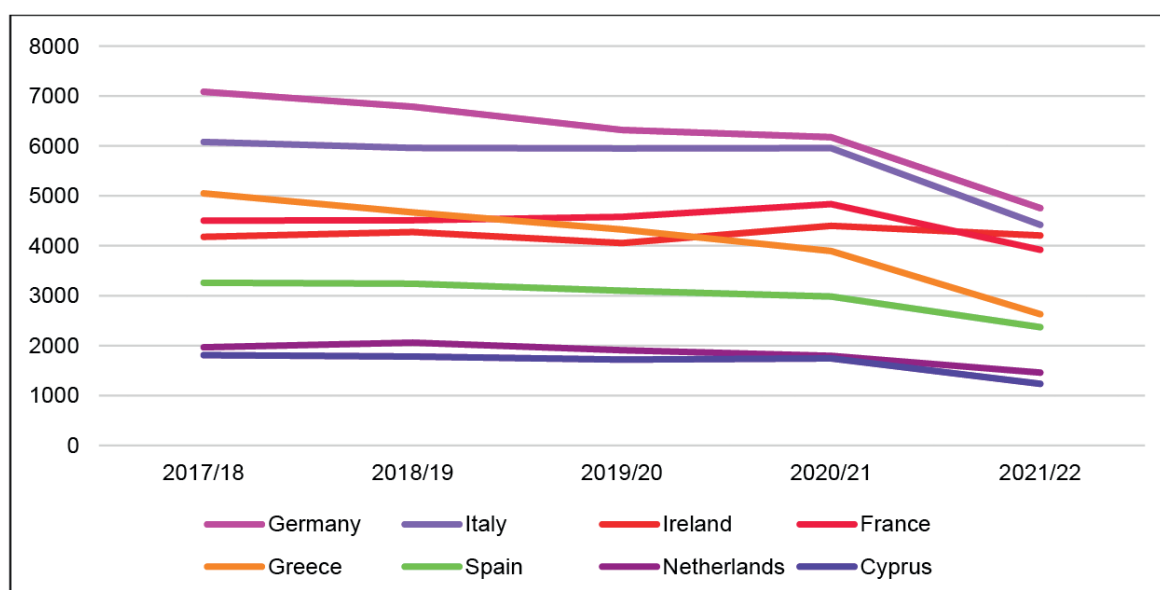


Figure 3: EU Enrolments in UK at PG level (2017/18 – 2021/22)

Source: HESA - hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from#non-uk

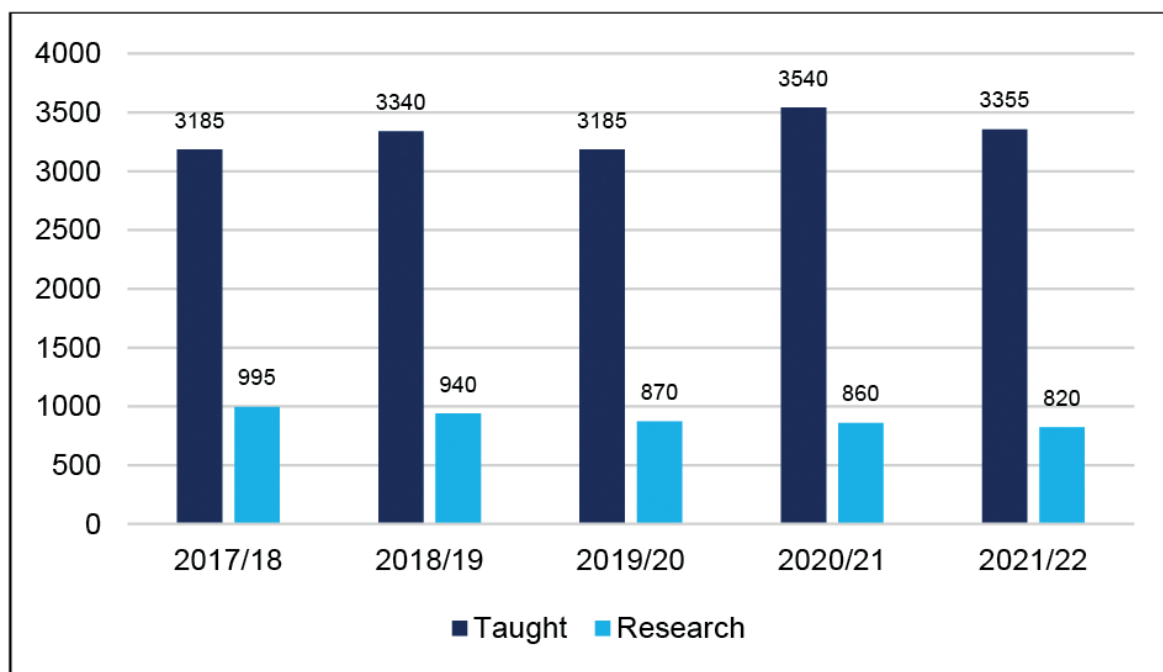


Figure 4: PG Students from Ireland in the UK (2017/18 – 2021/22)

Source: HESA: hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from#non-uk

Gender

As illustrated by figure 5 below, 72 percent of undergraduate applicants from Ireland to UK HE providers in 2021/2022 were female. This represents a higher proportion than international applicants to the UK in general, which averages at 61 percent.

Data from HESA suggest that this gender differential is largely explained by fields of study. In the 2020/21 academic year 20 percent of undergraduates from Ireland were enrolled in nursing and midwifery compared to just three percent of all international undergraduate students. As a large majority of nursing students are female this has impacted the overall gender balance data.

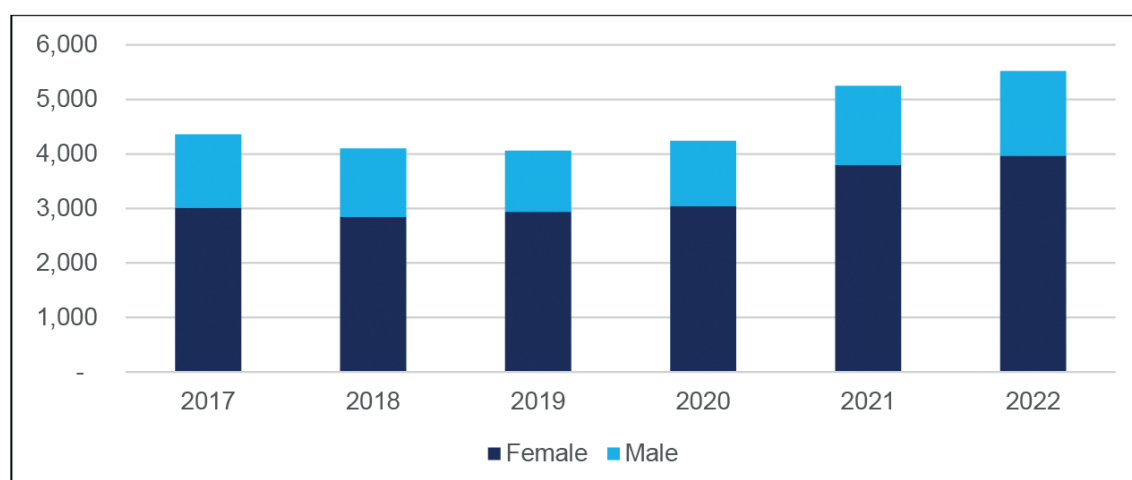


Figure 5: UG Applicants from Ireland to UK HE Providers by Gender (2017/18-2021/22)

Source: HESA: ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-releases/applicant-releases-2022-cycle/2022-cycle-applicant-figures-15-october-deadline

In contrast, the generally 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 in the UK, 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.

Gender data for postgraduate students in the UK was not accessible at this time.

Favoured Locations and HE Provider Choices

Figure 6 shows the breakdown of all EU students within the UK. Overall, the numbers of EU students enrolled in UK HE providers has dropped from 152,905 students in 2020/21 to 120,140 in 2021/22.

With the highest number of universities, England is the constant dominant choice for 80% of EU students followed by Scotland (14 percent), Wales (4 percent) and Northern Ireland (2 percent). For EU students, England has become increasingly important as a destination over the last four years at the expense of Scotland and Wales while Northern Ireland has remained stable.

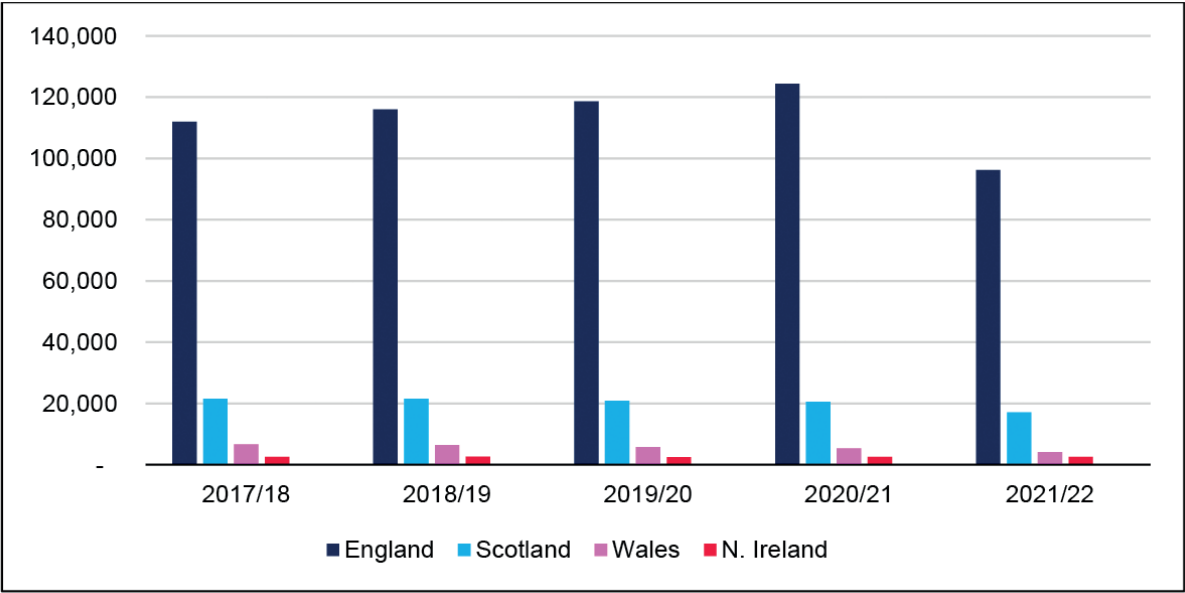


Figure 6: Location of Students from the EU within the UK (2017/18 - 2021/22)

Source: HESA: hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from#non-uk

In common with students from most other EU countries, figure 7 shows that undergraduate students from Ireland favour England as a destination. However, 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). Students from Ireland based in England are spread across the country with concentrations found in London (26 percent), the Southeast (15 percent) and the Northwest (15 percent).

Over the last year the numbers studying in Scotland have declined slightly which may be a result of the introduction of fees for students from Ireland from 2021/22 onwards for the first time. The numbers studying in Northern Ireland have increased slightly in the same period - students from Ireland account for 89 percent of EU students and 13 percent of 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=335 in 2021/22).

Following a similar pattern to undergraduate students, as figures 8 and 9 highlight, England is the dominant choice of location for postgraduate students from the EU with 81 percent choosing to study there, followed by Scotland (15 percent), Wales (3 percent) and Northern Ireland (1 percent).

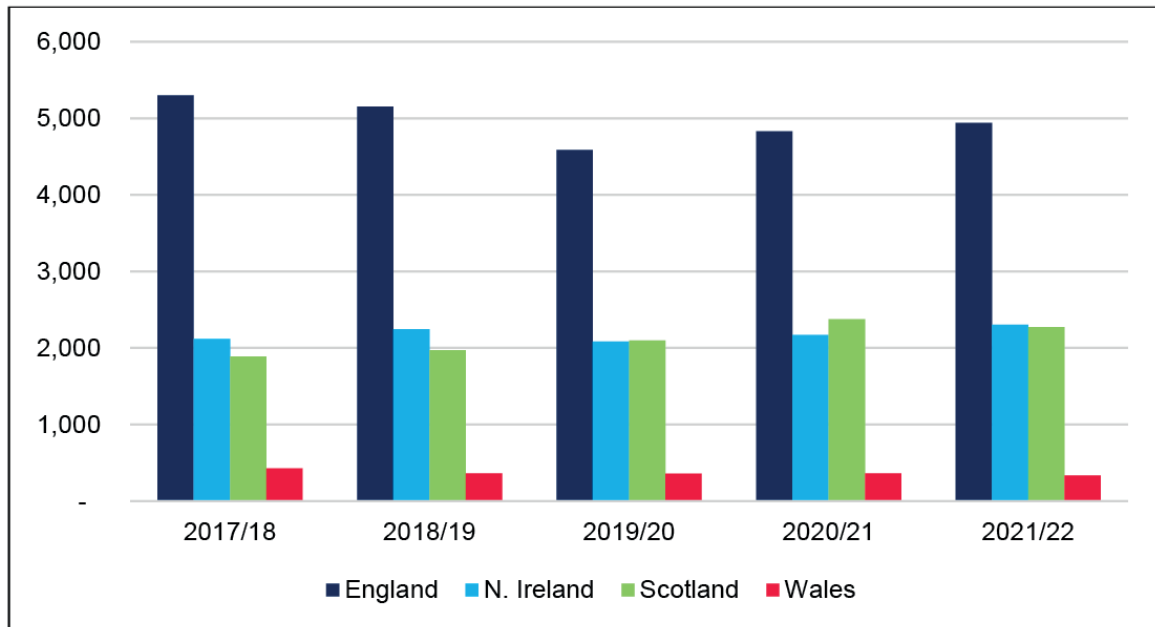


Figure 7: Location of UG Students from Ireland in the UK (2017/18 - 2021/22)

Source: HESA: hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from#non-uk

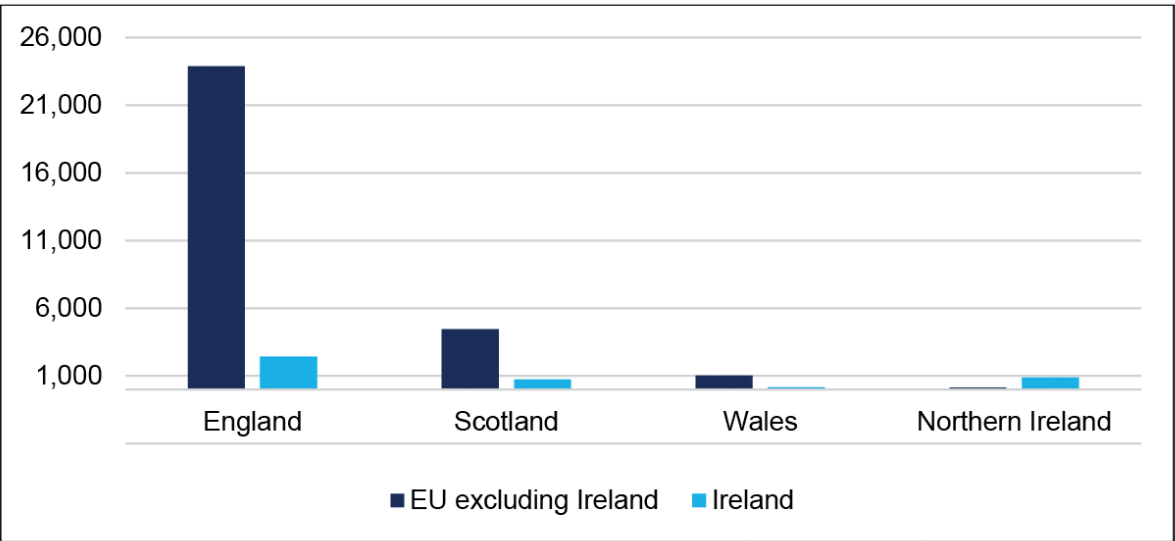


Figure 8: Location of PG Students from the EU within the UK (2021/22)

Source: HESA: hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from#non-uk

England is also the dominant choice for postgraduate students from Ireland, with 58 percent choosing to study there. Students from Ireland are spread across all regions of England, with 20 percent clustered in the London area and significant concentrations in the North-West, Southeast and East.

Scotland is also an important destination with 18 percent of postgraduate students from Ireland studying there. In contrast to the undergraduate profile which noted a decline in enrolments, the numbers studying in Scotland at postgraduate level increased in 2020/21, dropping slightly in 2021/22.

As noted above, students from Ireland are attracted to Northern Ireland more than other nationalities: 21 percent of postgraduate students from Ireland in the UK are studying in Northern Ireland, accounting for 86 percent of the region's EU postgraduate students.

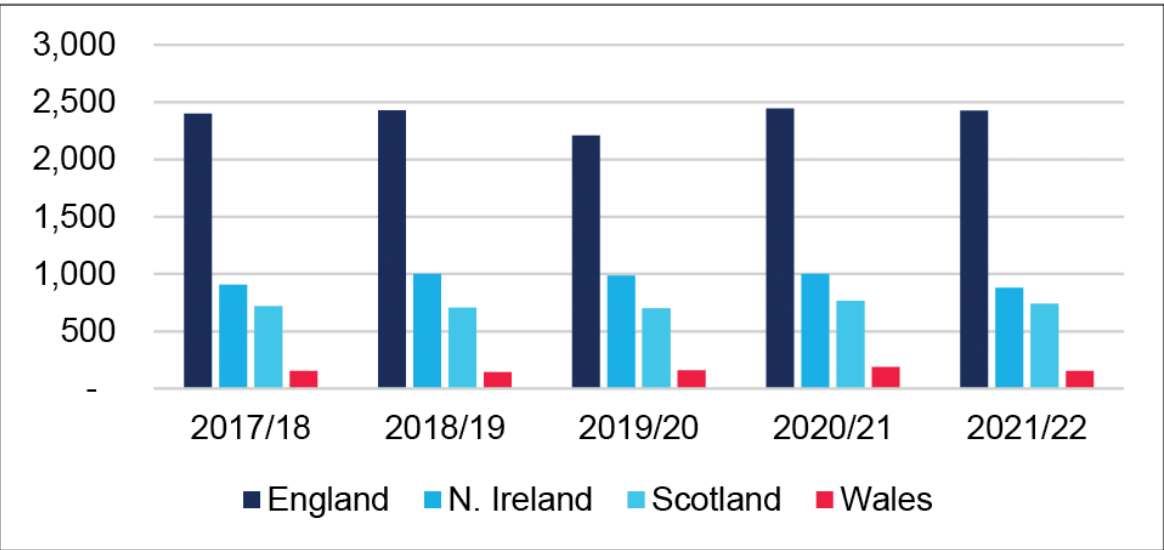


Figure 9: Location of PG Students from Ireland in the UK (2017/18 - 2021/22)

Source: HESA: hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from#non-uk

Table 1: Top 5 UK HE Providers for UG Students from Ireland (2018/19 - 2021/22)

2018/19 HE Provider	No.	2019/20 HE Provider	No.	2020/21 HE Provider	No.	2021/22 HE Provider	No.
Ulster University	880	Ulster University	670	Ulster University	700	Ulster University	805
Queen's University Belfast	345	Queen's University Belfast	405	Queen's University Belfast	440	Queen's University Belfast	575
Queen Margaret University	230	Queen Margaret University	240	Queen Margaret University	300	Queen Margaret University	265
Robert Gordon University	195	Robert Gordon University	215	Robert Gordon University	245	Robert Gordon University	235
Buckinghamshire New University	185	Stirling University	205	Stirling University	230	Stirling University	220

Source: HESA - hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-study (accessed March 2023)

Tables 1 and 2 below detail top UK HE provider choices for undergraduate and postgraduate students from Ireland.

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 consistent 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 HE providers 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 HE providers such as the University of Oxford and University of Cambridge enter the mix at this level.

Table 2: Top 5 UK HE providers for PG Students from Ireland (2018/19-2021/22)

2018/19 HE Provider	No.	2019/20 HE Provider	No.	2020/21 HE Provider	No.	2021/22 HE Provider	No.
Ulster University	555	Ulster University	575	Ulster University	570	Queen's University Belfast	455
Queen's University Belfast	430	Queen's University Belfast	405	Queen's University Belfast	420	Ulster University	410
University of Edinburgh	155	University of Edinburgh	150	University of Edinburgh	145	University of Edinburgh	195
Queen Margaret University	130	Queen Margaret University	125	University College London	125	University College London	125
University College London	130	University College London	125	Queen Margaret University	120	Queen Margaret University	120

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

Whether undertaking a postgraduate programme by research or by teaching, table 3 shows that universities in Northern Ireland remain the most popular for students from Ireland. Students undertaking programmes by research are found across 68 UK HE providers, 54 percent of whom are located within the top 5 listed in the table below. Students undertaking taught programmes are located in 161 HE providers, 41 percent of whom are listed in this table.

Table 3: Top 5 UK HE providers for PG Research and Taught Students from Ireland (2021/22)

Rank	PG Research HE Provider	No.	PG Taught HE Provider	No.
1	Queen's University Belfast	130	Ulster University	370
2	University of Cambridge	45	Queen's University Belfast	330
3	University of Edinburgh	45	University of Edinburgh	155
4	Ulster University	45	Queen Margaret University	120
5	University College London	45	University College London	80

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

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

A number of factors combine which push students from Ireland to consider studying internationally and make the UK a strong option.

A **lack of affordable accommodation** is one factor. Many say accommodation, particularly around Dublin, is expensive and raises the cost of studying in Ireland dramatically. Some feel they would have to live at home whilst studying.

Additionally, the **uncertainty of the CAO points system** is a factor. The CAO points system deters some students from applying to university in Ireland due to the fact that entry requirements are subject to change.

“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

Lastly, **limited course options** are a push factor. Availability of specialist and Joint Honours courses encourages students with a specific path in mind to look outside of Ireland.

Pull factors

Students consider a number of factors when exploring the possibility of moving to the UK to study. These include personal connections, studying, living and logistics.

Firstly, **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. Not only do personal connections inspire consideration of the UK, they also reassure students that the UK is a viable and ‘safe’ option for international study.

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.

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

– Current Student

Family and friends 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 can 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.

“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

Secondly, **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 in Ireland is appealing for students. Students perceive study advantages in the UK vs Ireland, favouring the UCAS application system and valuing the breadth of courses available.

There are 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.

The wide 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 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. 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. They believed there were fewer universities in Ireland offering their course at the same perceived standard.

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).

Thirdly, **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.

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

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. 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

The UK was seen to have 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.

“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

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).

Lastly, **logistics**. The excellent travel links with Ireland and the cultural similarities play a role in decision making, as well as the sense they’d be able to find a local job to work whilst studying. Prior to coming to the UK to study, students are keen to envision their life in the UK. The UK being far away enough for new experiences, but still familiar to students from Ireland, puts it ahead of other international options.

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

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.

There is also a 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.

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

3.2 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 studying in the UK. 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 would integrate into a new community and how happy they would 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. 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.

Nor was Covid-19 considered a problem or a factor. There was a 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.

3.3 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, personal recommendations, academic standing, location and financial viability.

Firstly, **course and 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.

“It was mainly the courses that drew me to UK universities 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

Secondly, **personal recommendations**. Personal recommendations play an important role in narrowing down students’ shortlists. Guidance counsellors, family, friends and colleagues all contribute to students from Ireland’s decision making.

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

Fourthly, **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.

“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

Lastly, **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. While different nations of the UK appeal in different ways, choice of higher education provider is unlikely to be driven by nation although 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”.

There is a perception of closer cultural ties between Scotland and Ireland. Ease of travel and the possibility of 4-year courses are also attractive. Amongst students from Ireland interviewed, participants tended to lack knowledge about Wales, and particularly those who didn’t already have a university in mind. 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.

3.4 Summary: The student journey from Ireland to the UK

The UK is seen to offer advantages in terms of the academic and broader student experience, with course variety, highly ranked programmes, modern facilities, good prospects for student accommodation, and a fulfilling extracurricular experience. Choice of UK HE provider is driven by course / institution, with priority factors including personal recommendations, ranking / reputation, module options, location, and financial considerations. The spark often comes from friends and family living / studying in the UK and these are key influencers on decision-making. Concerns about student accommodation, the uncertainty of the CAO points system, and course options that are not currently available in Ireland are also motivating factors.

While students do have differing perceptions of individual UK nations, these are unlikely to lead HE provider choice. Students' ultimate choice of HE provider often relates to personal connections; a HE provider recommended by friends / family, a HE provider they've interacted with directly through a rep, or an HE provider that's built the strongest emotional connection through regular communications during the application cycle. Students from Ireland can struggle to find the information they need, owing to a lack of content tailored specifically to them. They seek reassurance about finances, how their points translate, and how to apply. As well as getting detailed information on potential courses, students are keen to visualise what their experience could look like with a given HE provider. Virtual tours (covering accommodation and the local area) and insights into day-to-day living (e.g. local facilities, cost of living etc.) are valued. As students research their options, they particularly value video content, student stories and direct communications to get a feel for different institutions.

4. UK to Ireland:

Students from the UK choosing Ireland as a HE destination

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Students from the UK choosing Ireland as a HE destination

Ireland has one of the highest levels of higher education participation in the world with almost 60 percent of 25 – 34 year-olds achieving a higher-level qualification and a 75 percent gross enrolment rate in tertiary education. As an English-speaking country with significantly lower fee levels and easier access routes to higher education for mature students, it may seem apparent that Ireland would attract great numbers of UK students. The data reveals however, that the numbers of students from the UK choosing to study in Ireland is uneven and has dropped significantly over the last three years, while the number of students from Northern Ireland appears to be plateauing.

Enrolments

While enrolments from other EU countries in Ireland have increased by an average of 20 percent over the last two years, figures 10 and 11 show that undergraduate and postgraduate enrolment from students based in the UK is volatile, with growth up to 2020/21, but an eight percent decline evident in 2021/22.

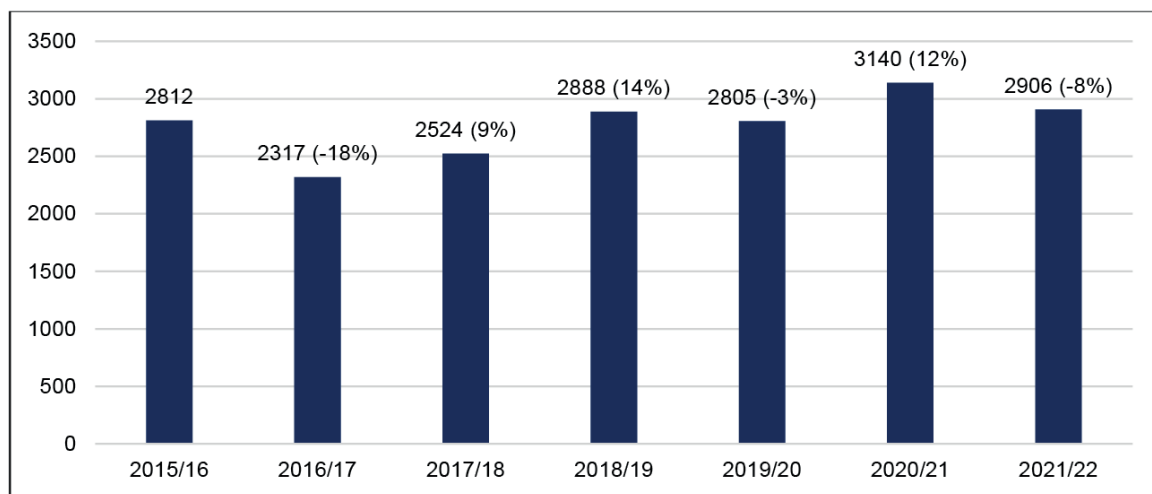


Figure 10: UK Enrolment Trends in Ireland, 2015/16 – 2021/22 (UG & PG)

Source: HEA: hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/

Further analysis suggests that the volatility is especially prevalent at undergraduate level and is associated with students from the UK (excluding Northern Ireland). As figure 11 demonstrates, these students increased by 24 percent in 2018/19, dropped by 18 percent in 2019/20, increasing by a further 25 percent in 2020/21 and dropping again by 17 percent in 2021/22.

On the other hand, numbers of students from Northern Ireland have increased each year (from 1,199 in 2015/16 to 1,637 in 2021/22), but only by 12 students in 2021/22. In summary, full-time undergraduate students from the UK have declined by 37 percent (from 734 to 467) over the last year, while numbers from Northern Ireland have increased by 1 percent (from 975 to 987).

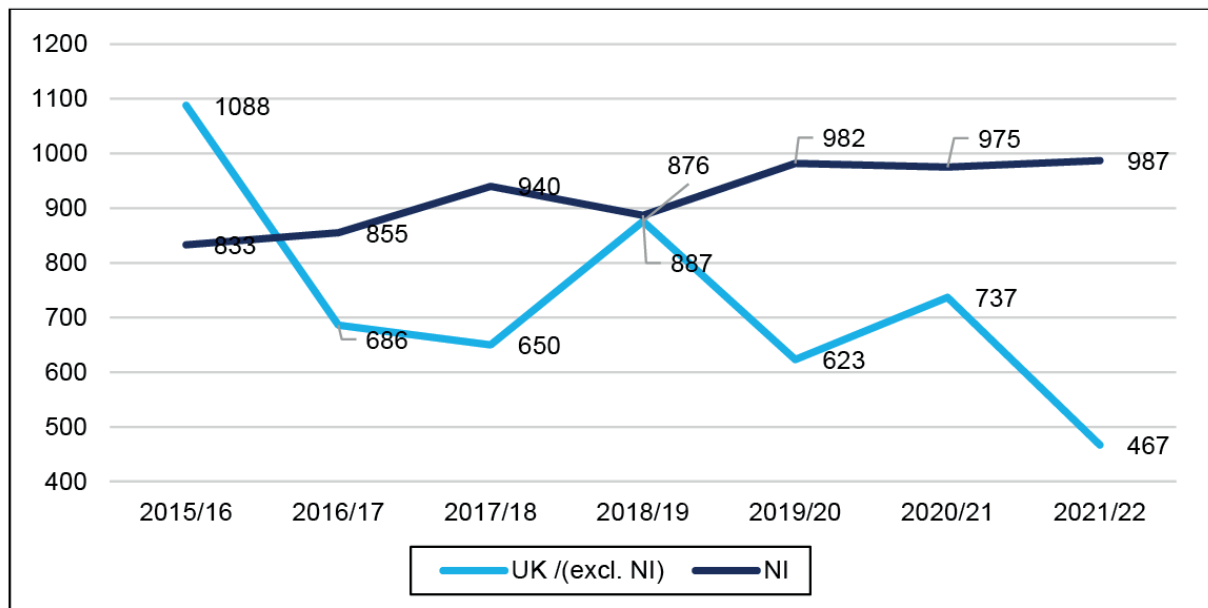


Figure 11: UK Students in Ireland: UG Enrolment Trends, 2015/16 – 2021/22 (FT)

Source: HEA: hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/

The picture at **postgraduate level** shows the strong growth trajectory for EU students enrolled at this level (an almost 30 percent increase over the last year), with steady growth from the UK (see figure 12). Enrolments have increased from 676 in 2015/16 to 1,047 in 2021/22 with 660 students originating from Great Britain and 387 from Northern Ireland. Postgraduate students account for 36 percent of UK students in Ireland.

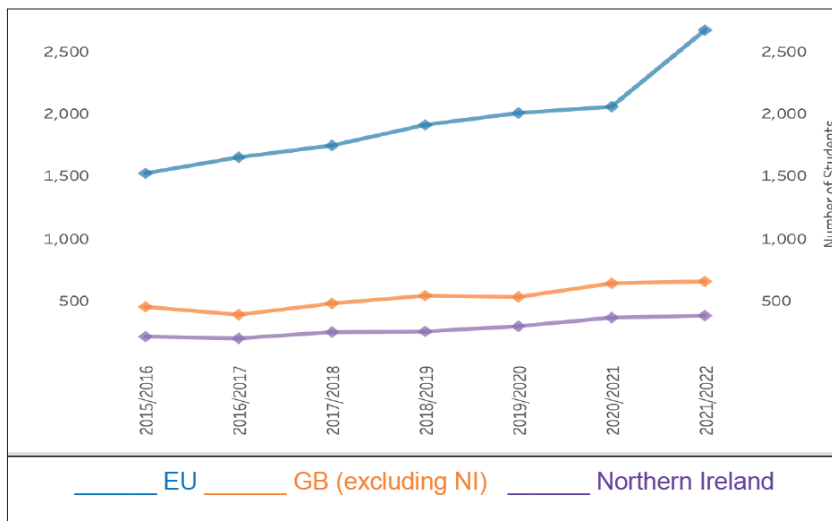


Figure 12: EU PG Students Enrolled in HEIs in Ireland (2021/22)

Source: HEA: hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/

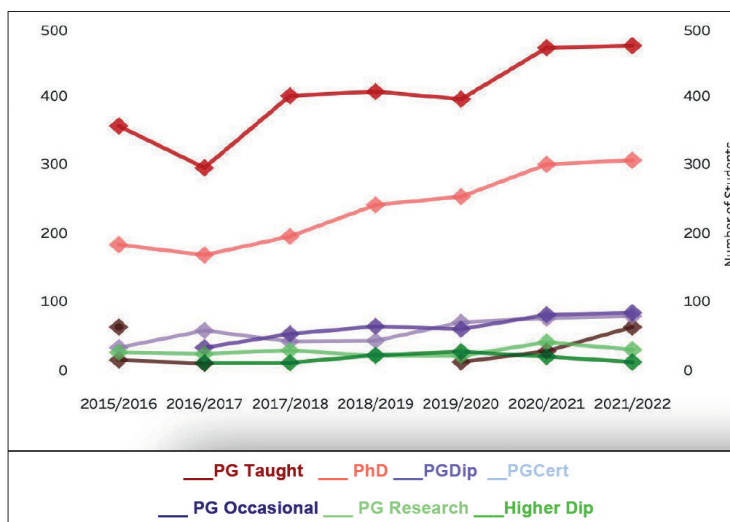


Figure 13: PG Students from the UK in Ireland by Type of Programme (2015/16 – 2021/22)

Source: HEA: hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/

Sixty-eight percent of postgraduate students from the UK are enrolled in taught programmes in Ireland. As evidenced from figure 13, research numbers are also high with 306 PhD students and 30 masters students. Figure 14 reveals a difference between students from Great Britain and Northern Ireland: while taught programmes are the most popular for both, significantly more PhD students originate from Great Britain.

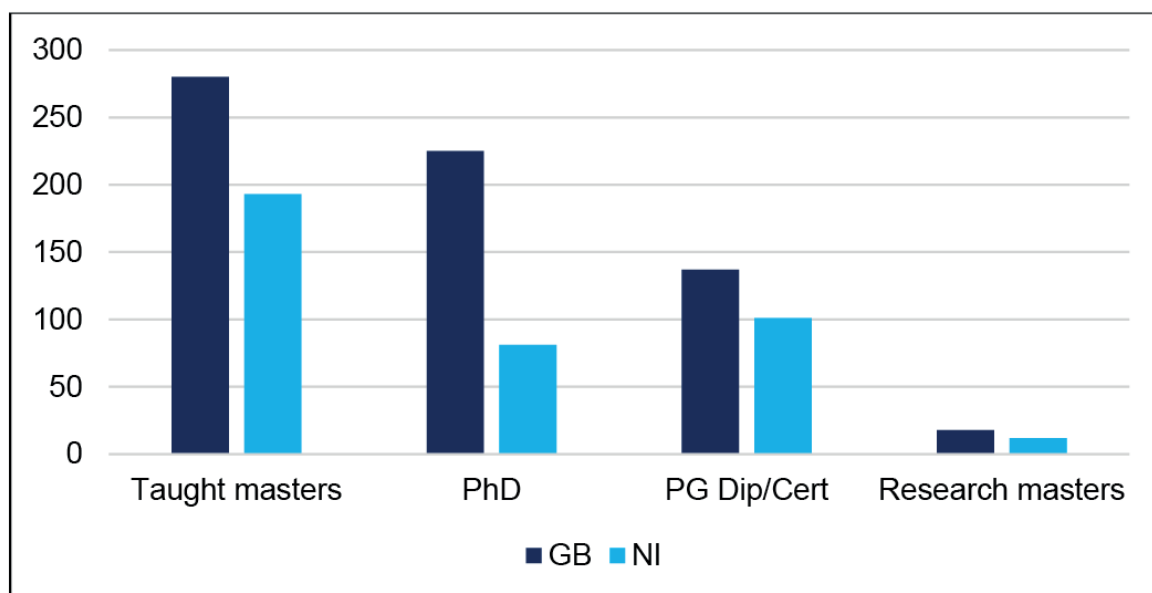


Figure 14: Postgraduate Students from Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Ireland by Type of Programme (2021/22)

Source: HEA: hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/

Enrolments

From a balanced gender proportion in 2015/16 (50.3 percent female and 49.7 percent male), over 60 percent of all UK enrolments in Ireland are now female, with no significant difference between the jurisdictions.

Figure 15 highlights undergraduate (a) and postgraduate (b) enrolment by gender. At undergraduate level, the volatility noted above is evident, but relatively equal up to 2020/21. In 2021/22 the number of male enrolments dropped by 18 percent from 931 to 760, while female enrolments dropped 9 percent, from 1,201 to 1,094.

At postgraduate level a greater gender balance is evident, with male and female enrolments were almost identical up to 2020/21. In 2021/22 male enrolments dropped by 4 percent, while female enrolments have increased by 9 percent.

Three quarters of full-time undergraduate enrolments from the UK are aged 23 or over and 82 percent of postgraduate enrolments from the UK are aged 24 years or over.

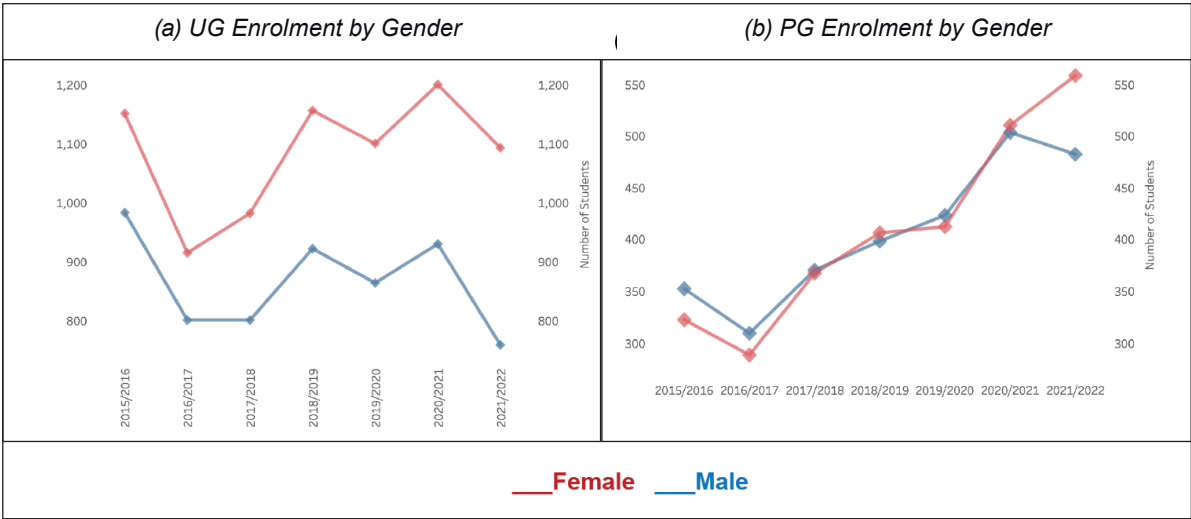


Figure 15: Students from Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Ireland by Gender (2015/16 – 2021/22)
Source: HEA: hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/

Favoured Locations and HE Provider Choices

Students from Great Britain and Northern Ireland are spread across the HE providers, generally favouring Dublin, Galway and Cork and the traditional universities over the technological universities. As table 4 highlights, Trinity College Dublin is the dominant choice for both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Similarly, 85 percent of Atlantic Technological University (ATU)'s students in this category are from Northern Ireland with for example, 53 percent of students originating from Co. Londonderry in 2021/22 (and based at ATU's Letterkenny Campus which is 35km from Derry city, in the North West of Northern Ireland).

Dublin City University and University College Cork are both important choices from postgraduate students, but less so for undergraduate students.

Table 4: Top Five HE Providers in Ireland for Students from UK

Source: HEA: hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/

Rank	2021/22 HE Provider	NO	PG	TOTAL
1	Trinity College Dublin	545	261	806
2	University College Dublin	157	199	356
3	Dundalk Institute of Technology	237	12	249
4	University of Galway	149	83	232
5	University College Cork	54	117	171

That geographical location is important is demonstrated by the case of Dundalk Institute of Technology (DKIT) which is located in Co. Louth, Ireland and just 7 km from the border with Co. Armagh in Northern Ireland. DKIT is the third most important HE provider for students from the UK (almost exclusively at undergraduate level). Disaggregating the figures between Great Britain and Northern Ireland illustrates that 100 percent of DKIT's students in this cohort originate from Northern Ireland and that - for example - 77 percent of students are from Co. Down (located beside Co. Armagh, in the south east of Northern Ireland).

Figure 16, showing enrolment proportions of undergraduate and postgraduate students by county in Northern Ireland, clearly demonstrates the high and increasing proportion of students originating from Co. Down (37 percent). Students from Co. Antrim are next in significance numerically although proportions have decreased from 31 percent in 2015/16 to 24 percent in 2021/22. Students from Northern Ireland from Co. Londonderry are important but also declining, with very low proportions of students originating from counties Fermanagh, Tyrone and Armagh.

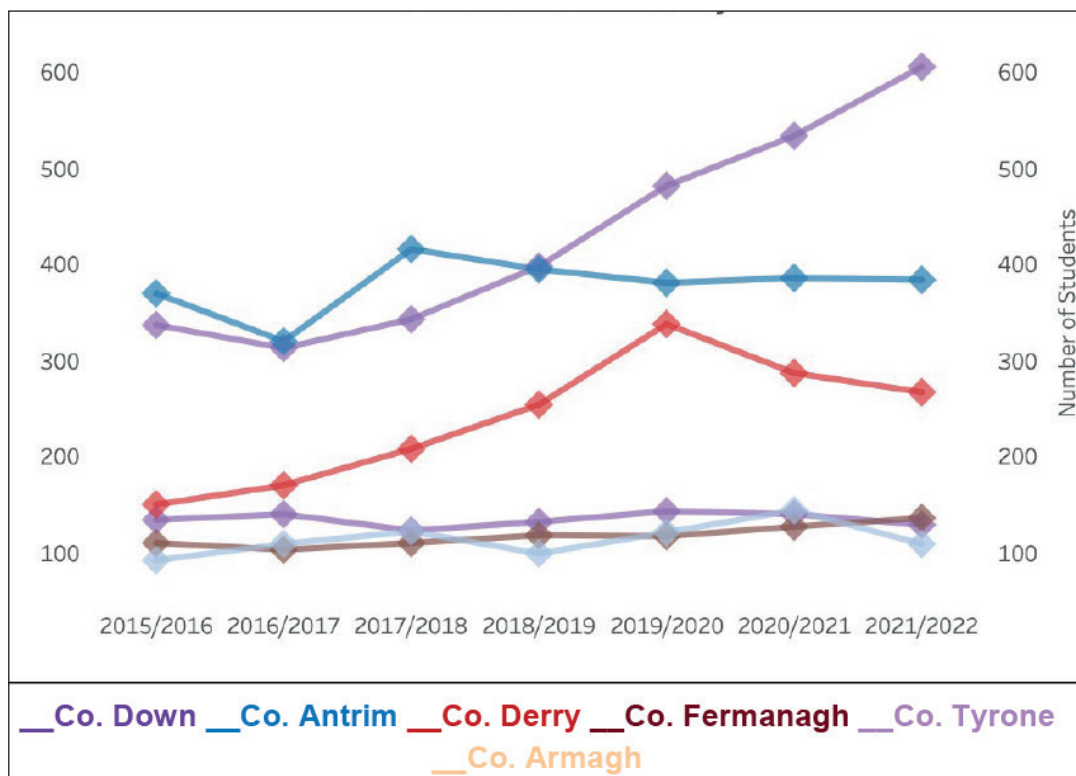


Figure 16: County of Origin of Students from Northern Ireland in Ireland (2015/16 – 2021/22)

Source: HEA: hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/

Fields of Study⁸

Figure 17 emphasises the popularity of Arts and Humanities, and Health and Welfare programmes. While there has been some fluctuation, these priorities have not changed over the last seven years. Looking at students from Great Britain in isolation suggests a strong concentration on Arts and Humanities - the focus of 41 percent of these students, while 25 percent are studying in the broad Health and Welfare category (18 percent studying medicine), with few other broad areas standing out.

	Academic Year						
	2015/2..	2016/2..	2017/2..	2018/2..	2019/2..	2020/2..	2021/2..
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries a..	2.1%	3.2%	2.4%	1.8%	2.0%	1.8%	2.1%
Arts and humanities	25.8%	24.3%	23.7%	23.4%	22.0%	23.8%	21.9%
Business, administration and law	16.5%	12.6%	14.8%	18.3%	19.9%	19.5%	17.4%
Education	2.0%	1.9%	2.6%	2.2%	2.3%	2.7%	2.5%
Engineering, manufacturing and..	6.9%	8.3%	7.8%	8.2%	8.2%	9.0%	8.8%
Generic programmes and qualifi..	0.3%	0.6%	0.5%	0.9%	1.9%	0.9%	0.7%
Health and welfare	23.2%	24.8%	23.5%	21.4%	20.1%	18.1%	20.5%
Information and Communication..	4.6%	5.5%	4.8%	4.3%	4.1%	3.3%	3.5%
Natural sciences, mathematics a..	10.3%	8.5%	8.4%	8.4%	8.2%	9.2%	9.4%
Services	2.2%	3.3%	3.5%	2.2%	3.0%	3.6%	3.4%
Social sciences, journalism and i..	6.2%	7.0%	8.0%	8.8%	8.2%	8.0%	9.8%
Grand Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 17: Overall Enrolment by ISCED Fields of Study, UK (2015/16 - 2021/22)

Source: HEA: hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/

8: This data is not currently accessible for students from Ireland studying in the UK.

Although the same fields are also dominant for students from Northern Ireland, the figures suggest a broader spread across disciplines: 24 percent are studying Health and Welfare (7 percent medicine); 21 percent Arts and Humanities; 16 percent Business, Administration and Law and 11 percent in Engineering. The same fields dominate when looking at levels of study: Almost 28 percent of those enrolled at undergraduate level are studying Arts and Humanities and 24 percent Health and Welfare, with Business, Administration and Law being third in popularity at 14 percent.

Figure 18 shows that almost 50 percent of female undergraduates are enrolled in the first two broad categories, but male students favour Business, Administration and Law over Health and Welfare.

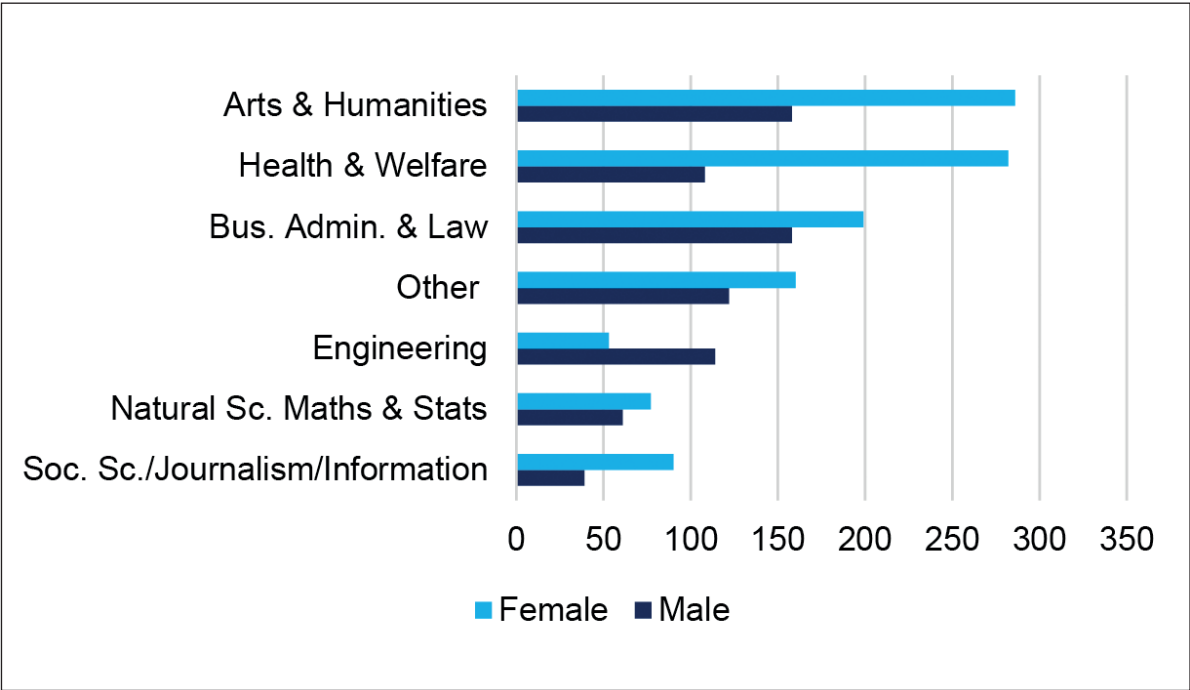
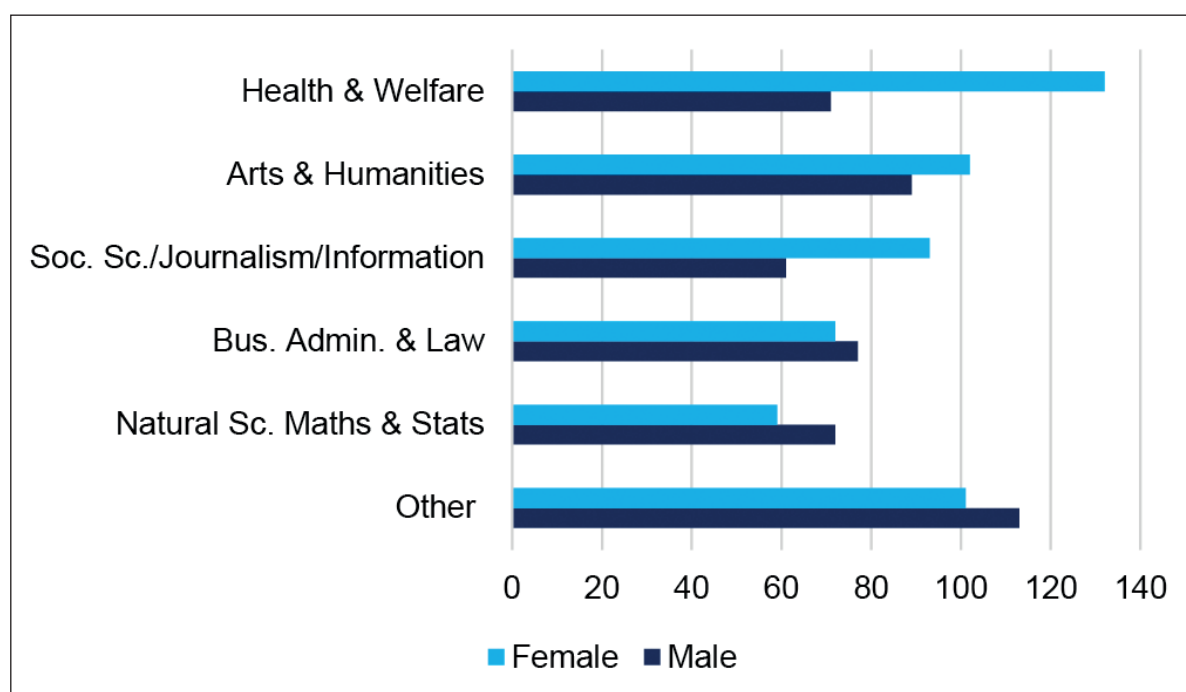


Figure 18: UG Students from UK in Ireland by Gender (2015/16 – 2021/22)
Source: HEA: hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/

Figure 19 shows top subject choices for **postgraduate** students from the UK highlighting that while the same subject dominates for males and females, as with **undergraduates**, female students are more concentrated across Health and Welfare, Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences.



19: Postgraduate Students from UK in Ireland by Gender (2015/16 – 2021/22)

Source: HEA: hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/

For several decades higher education mobility between Ireland and the UK has been important, especially flows from Ireland to the UK. The movement of students, as the foregoing suggests, has not been even and some volatility is evident, especially over the last decade.

Although less data is available for the UK, it is clear that student applications and enrolments from Ireland continue to increase, while declining from all other EU countries in the context of the UK's decision to leave the EU.

On the other hand, student flows from the UK to Ireland have been shown to be in decline – particularly at undergraduate level and from Great Britain. While enrolments at postgraduate level and PhD numbers show an upward trend, the overall trajectory is negative at this time.

While some reasons for these differing flows are assumed such as the reaffirmation of the CTA, proximity, family connections, language, similar education systems, cost and accommodation issues, little work has been done to fully understand what attracts students from one jurisdiction to the other and what enabling factors and barriers are at play.

Having examined the key findings from the available data in this section, the following sections describe the findings from qualitative research which was undertaken with undergraduate students from the UK studying in Ireland.

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

The key messages from these students suggest the value of low fees and high, internationally recognised academic standards; expert and accessible lecturers and staff; English speaking; good facilities and excellent access to Erasmus+ and international study abroad programmes and work placements. Students enjoy Irish society and living in an EU country (without requiring a visa), commenting on acceptance, openness, greater tolerance, kindness, a good balance between academic life and social life and the accessibility and beauty of the landscape. Many interviewees from Northern Ireland said that studying in Ireland offered the chance to move to a different but adjacent place and one which for some, allowed them a connection with their Irish identity in a more open way.

Students from Northern Ireland

Many interviewees indicated that studying in Ireland offered an opportunity to move to a different but connected place - one which was only a bus, train or drive away. When applying, most students from Northern Ireland were very clear about where they wanted to study and the specific programme they were interested in. Aside from medical students who generally apply for all medical schools, very few applied to multiple HE providers and programmes.

“It was family which influenced me ... A lot of family and friends are studying in Ireland, and I thought that if I went, I would have a very convenient network already there.”

A decision to study in Ireland is facilitated by proximity and by the relative or perceived ease of access for qualifying mature students:

“I applied three times for midwifery at [HE Provider in Ireland], but I couldn’t get in, I needed to do access courses. Then I heard that you can do the same degree in [HE in Ireland]. I applied and got in first time. In NI, universities are the only places you can do degrees, I had presumed it was the same down South.”

Connecting with their Irish identity was also important for some interviewees, a number of whom had taken A levels in Irish and wanted to have the opportunity to use the language and see it in evidence in their everyday lives.⁹

Finally, a further advantage for students from Northern Ireland is the fact that they can access student loans to study in Ireland quite easily through sources such as website [NI Direct](#) and under the same conditions as if they were studying in Northern Ireland or the UK. Students from England, Scotland or Wales cannot access loans to study in Ireland from the UK or from Ireland.

“I looked at other European countries for medicine, but Ireland was more suitable because it’s English-speaking and unlike other EU countries you don’t have to worry about visas.”

Students from England

The interviews suggest that at least some students from England may start out with less *intention* to study in Ireland than students from Northern Ireland. The sample is too small to make categorical statements here, but of the eight students from England who were interviewed, four were studying medicine and seemed to happen upon Irish medical schools (according to HEA figures, 55% of all students from Great Britain (excluding Northern Ireland) were studying medicine in 2021/22)¹⁰. For these students, Ireland offered a less onerous and less competitive application process and a good opportunity to study medicine in an English-speaking country to the same standard and quality as the UK.

While the UK’s decision to leave the EU made Ireland more attractive for these students, as no visas were required because of the Common Travel Agreement (CTA), gaining access to reputable medical schools was the key motivation for them rather than a specific desire to study in Ireland. Most were frank about their lack of knowledge of Ireland in advance, with some finding it quite similar to the UK and others stating they were unprepared for how different Ireland was.

Over 80% of students from Great Britain (England, Scotland, Wales) who are studying in Ireland are based in universities, and over half of these are based in Trinity College Dublin. Those interviewees studying at Trinity College Dublin expressed different motivations for studying in Ireland including the desire to study in an EU country following the UK’s exit from the EU, especially because of Erasmus+ opportunities, cost and culture. A number also mentioned that UK students who had unsuccessfully applied to Oxford or Cambridge universities often did not wish to study elsewhere in the UK and then looked to Trinity.

9: Irish has overtaken French to be the second most popular language at A-Level as noted the 2023, Language Trends research commissioned by British Council Northern Ireland ([Language Trends Northern Ireland 2023 | British Council](#)).

10: <https://hea.ie/statistics/data-for-download-and-visualisations/key-facts-figures/>. Accessed February 13th, 2023.

Sources of Information and the Application Process

Respondents reported few obstacles in obtaining required information about the HE providers they were interested in or about studying in Ireland in general. Interest was initially piqued through word-of-mouth (friends, family or colleagues who had studied in Ireland or knew about specific programme availability), social media (influencers and current students) and media (the television series *Normal People* in the case of Trinity for example).

The Central Application System

Undergraduate applicants from the UK and EU must apply through the Central Application Office (CAO) to study in Ireland. The more detailed and focussed information required by prospective students later in the decision-making process was found to be gleaned from the CAO website and individual HE Provider websites. No students interviewed could recall using or having knowledge of the Education in Ireland website.¹²

Some schools in Northern Ireland provided limited information on the CAO application system, but generally students choosing to study in Ireland did not receive assistance with their application from their guidance teachers. All interviewed offered considerable feedback on differences between the CAO and UCAS application systems.

“My application was very stressful. The conversion of A-Levels to CAO points is unfair. People in the South do 6-8 subjects and most people here do 3 A-Levels – it’s not weighted properly. I actually did 4 A Levels to try to get my points up - it was so tough.”

“I did all that to get into [HE Provider in Ireland], yet I had no idea whether I would get in or not. My fourth A-level - even with an A-Star, was only worth 45 points, so the maximum I could get with 4 top A-Levels was 540 points.”

Although there were clear differences of opinion, the majority of students interviewed noted that the CAO system was more straightforward than UCAS, especially because a personal statement was not required, and offered more choices for the applicant. Nonetheless, informants agreed that the CAO system was inflexible and that the website seemed difficult to navigate and was considered ‘dated’. Students were surprised that certain documentation had to be physically posted rather than uploaded and stated that information for UK students - especially for mature students - was difficult to unearth.

The most pervasive feedback on the CAO system was related to the impact of the late publication of offers, and the translation of A-Level results to Leaving Cert points.

Timing of CAO Offers

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing changes to the operation of the Leaving Certificate Examinations over the last few years CAO offers have been issued 3-4 weeks after UCAS offers, placing students wishing to study in Ireland in a challenging predicament. The volatility around point requirements for programmes in Ireland means that students could not assume that they would be offered a place, and therefore not accepting their UCAS offer could have resulted in their having no options at all.

12: [Education in Ireland](#) is the government-supported body which promotes studying in Ireland to overseas students. Education in Ireland is managed by Enterprise Ireland and focusses mainly on prospective students from outside the EU and UK.

“I thought I was coming to Galway with my two friends, but the CAO system messed them up because of late offers. Both got really good points and were dead set on Galway, but neither could find accommodation and said we’re not moving away to be homeless. They had both applied to UCAS as well and ended up going to Queens instead.”

For students coming to Ireland this delay also meant that they only had 1-2 weeks to secure accommodation, which in the current housing environment is not just stressful but can result in both dropping out and a decision not to study in Ireland, as highlighted in the quote above.

A Level Results and CAO Points

All respondents agreed that the CAO translation of A Level results to CAO points lacked clarity and potentially placed them at a significant disadvantage compared to Leaving Cert students. Several noted that this was a disincentive and a barrier to their friends applying to study in Ireland:

“The CAO application was an absolute minefield compared to UCAS. I think the UCAS personal statement is a good idea because some of the girls I’m in college with just don’t have a clue why they are there. A better selection process would steer people in the right direction and make sure they are fit for the course.”

Aside from a small number of mature students or students who went to school in Ireland, all those interviewed had also applied for UK university places through UCAS and understood that system more clearly as their schools had focussed on it. Views were equally split around system preferences, with some considering UCAS a fairer system because a personal statement and interviews are required and others noting that CAO is fairer because nothing other than your academic results can influence the outcome.

Nonetheless, even for those who favoured the CAO system, the lateness of offers, the perceived unequal translation of A Level results and the difficulty in navigating the website left a sense of dissatisfaction:

“I struggle to say which one I think is better. Objectively it’s good to have something completely impartial like the CAO as there’s no chance of biases coming into it. On the flip side, the personal statement was such a big part of my UCAS application; I spent a lot of time writing and editing it. It gave me the opportunity to talk about other aspects of my life and why I’d love to do this course. With the CAO it’s just points and it’s like you are not a person. Also there are no interviews and it would have been quite nice to speak to the university and department a little beforehand.”

Living in Ireland

The positive findings of international studies and surveys around friendliness and the quality of life in Ireland were reflected in the interviews with students from both Northern Ireland and England.¹³

Most students interviewed were effusive in their praise of the friendliness and kindness of people, the welcome they received, the multicultural, open and cosmopolitan society (particularly in Dublin, Cork and Galway) and the general sense of acceptance which they encountered. Students from Northern Ireland also commented on feeling relaxed in Ireland and enjoyed being able to express their Irish identity.

“In my experience, if you’re someone of a different ethnicity or nationality or religion, it’s more accepting than places I’ve been in the UK or Belfast. My friends who are studying in the UK haven’t all had a great experience. A lot of them say it took a very long time to get acquainted with people, whereas I clicked with nearly everyone quickly.

Ireland is a beautiful country and there’s a lot of freedom. I think Irish people have a charisma and a genuine kindness that still exists amongst the younger population which is very attractive.”

Students from England indicated that they had not always considered that there would be differences between Ireland and the UK and some expressed surprise at societal differences in society (usually positively) but also at the different systems and structures:

“I chose Ireland over the USA and Australia, because I knew it is similar and is English-speaking. The cost was significant and I now realise that Ireland is an expensive country... I was actually surprised how different everything was. I expected things to be more or less the same, but I’m glad it’s not. I’m experiencing a different culture as well.”

– Student from England

Interestingly, this was also an unexpected finding for students from Northern Ireland, who were often taken aback by how Northern Ireland and Ireland systems differed (including banking, phones, licencing, welfare and tax systems) and how, despite the CTA, these systems did not seem to make any attempt to communicate with each other.

“There were differences I wasn’t expecting ... It took a while to figure out the systems and I had to find the right people to talk to... things like getting my PPS number, a Southern bank account and a Southern phone number, it all took longer than I expected.”

13: [Education in Ireland](#) is the government-supported body which promotes studying in Ireland to overseas students. Education in Ireland is managed by Enterprise Ireland and focusses mainly on prospective students from outside the EU and UK.

4.2 Barriers to students from the UK considering Ireland as a study destination

Interviewees, without exception, raised the nationwide pressures on accommodation and the high cost of living as the most negative and undesirable aspect of life in Ireland. These issues equally exercised students studying in cities and those studying in smaller towns such as Letterkenny, Sligo and Dundalk. The language used was strong and most students spoke from first hand experience. Several students mentioned the cost of living in Ireland combined with the lack of student loans meant that they were still dependent on their parents, which was not something they had intended.

UK (and European) students who apply through the CAO are probably the most disadvantaged students when it comes to locating accommodation in Ireland. Other international (non-EU students) are notified that they have secured a place in May, so have some months to look for accommodation. Additionally, most HE providers offer on-campus accommodation to non-EU international students (especially first years). Students from Ireland receive their offers at the same time as UK and other European applicants and while growing numbers struggle to find accommodation, they have some level of advantage by being on home territory, and as noted by interviewees, Irish students often tend to live at home.

Irish HE providers were compared unfavourably to UK HE providers by some interviewees in this context who noted that UK universities provide accommodation for all first-year students, so the search for accommodation is not an additional obstacle to be overcome by the newly arriving student. Having all students in halls also helps with making friends and integrating, which several interviewees stated was difficult in Ireland where students tend to go to college locally with friends from school, live at home, or go home at the weekends.

Inadequate public transport as well as problems around public health access was raised by a small number of students.

The Influence of the UK Leaving the EU

Interviewees were asked if their decision to study in Ireland was impacted by the UK's decision to leave the EU, and whether in their view the fact that Ireland is an EU country makes it a more attractive study destination in general.

The UK's decision to leave the EU was also a particular concern for students who are now in third or fourth year. At the time they applied there was a lack of clarity over the Common Travel Agreement and the availability of Erasmus+ programmes in the UK. Students from Northern Ireland had additional concerns about the possible introduction of a hard border and how that might impact their day-to-day movements. A small number of students from England specifically chose to study in Ireland as a reaction to the UK leaving the EU. However, for the most part, and for those interviewed in first and second year, it was not the key deciding factor at application stage, rather an advantage that has become apparent while living in Ireland. In this context, students focussed on the value of access to Erasmus+ programmes, of living in an EU country, getting a degree from an EU university and of not having to worry about entry and exit visas.

All respondents - even those who did not consider the UK's decision to leave the EU as a factor in their own decision making process, commented that Ireland was probably more appealing as a study destination post the UK's decision to leave the EU. The fact that Ireland is English-speaking, located in the EU, combined with the wide availability of Erasmus+ and other study abroad programmes were the most cited reasons, but several also referred to high levels of internationalisation (of the HE providers and the cities) and a sense of living in a European country.

4.3 Perceptions and the appeal of UK HE Providers

Of the 20 students interviewed, 16 (80 percent) had applied through UCAS for universities in England and Scotland and almost all had been offered places.¹⁴ No students had applied to Wales or to HE providers in any other countries.

While some students found the UCAS process frustrating, complex and occasionally unwelcoming, most made it very clear that their decision to study in Ireland was not a reflection of UK universities, rather more about the attractions of Ireland itself, about wanting a change, about proximity and ease of access, as well as lower fees, specific programmes and (for medical students) the availability of places.

“It wasn’t that the UK universities were lacking. My school was very focussed on Oxford and Cambridge. I messed up UCAS and then no-where else in the UK appealed to me, so I thought of Dublin. I think if you come from London, sometimes another UK city just isn’t attractive - it feels more foreign than another country! UK Universities shouldn’t take it personally - it wasn’t their fault!!”

“I applied to the UK and Ireland and my preference was the UK initially although I was also thinking strongly about Australia. But then I thought Ireland is just across the pond and the system is quite similar. Irish medical schools have such a good international reputation, and the degrees are accepted in all other countries.”

For most, the UK universities’ important advantage was the sector’s internationally acknowledged reputation for excellence in both teaching and research which has evolved over hundreds of years in some cases. The associated prestige, consistently higher rankings as well as the broad programme range of offer by virtue of the sheer size of the higher education sector was firmly acknowledged.

14: The universities most mentioned were Queen’s University Belfast; Ulster University; University of Oxford; Cambridge University; St. Andrew’s University; Dundee University; King’s College London; Durham University; Edinburgh University; University of Glasgow; University of Aberdeen and Newcastle University.

4.4 Summary: The student journey from the UK to Ireland

Attitudes to the academic quality and rigour experienced in Ireland were exceptionally positive. Interviewees believed that their academic expectations were being met and their experience compared well or exceeded those of their friends studying in the UK. When asked if they would recommend studying in Ireland to a prospective student from the UK and many commenting that they have recommended studying in Ireland to family and friends. All interviewees offered considerable feedback on differences between the CAO and the UCAS application system. Each interviewee spoke of concerns with the late receipt of an offer of a university place, the cost of living and the difficulty in securing accommodation. For students from Northern Ireland, the decision to study in Ireland is facilitated by proximity, cultural heritage and expression and the relative ease of access for mature students. For students from England, the fact that Ireland is English-speaking is seen as the most relevant consideration followed by academic quality, cost and availability of places. A small number of students from England specifically chose to study in Ireland in reaction to the UK's decision to leave the EU, but for most (and for all first and second year students) it was not the key deciding factor at application stage.

“The reputation of UK universities is very high. I think one of the best things about the UK is the quality of research and the contribution made to the global community.”

Students focussed on the value of access to Erasmus+ programmes, of living in an EU country and getting a degree from an EU university and on not having to worry about entry and exit visas. A few interviewees commented on their surprise at the need for different mobile phone providers, utilities etc. There seemed to be a general lack of awareness on practical differences between the two countries. Providing information to support with the student journey – from translation of A Levels to Leaving Cert points, differences/ cost of living in Ireland as well as information provision on accommodation would support students in their choice of Ireland as a higher education destination.



5. Summary

and Recommendations

As neighbours and countries with a complex, shared history, the mobility of people between Ireland and the UK has always been important. This is especially true in a higher education context where the flows of students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels have been a core part of the student provision in both markets.

Ireland to UK

A summary of the student journey from Ireland to the UK, along with recommendations is provided below.

1. **Why leave Ireland?** Students consider HE options outside of Ireland due to concerns about student accommodation, the uncertainty of the CAO points system (lateness of offers), and course options that are not currently available in Ireland.
2. **Family influence.** Friends and family living / studying in the UK often spark consideration of the UK as a study destination and are key influencers on decision-making.
3. **Attraction to the UK.** The UK is seen to offer advantages in terms of the academic and broader student experience, with course variety, highly ranked programmes, modern facilities, good prospects for student accommodation, and a fulfilling extra-curricular experience.
4. **Information needs.** Students from Ireland can struggle to find the information they need, owing to a lack of content tailored specifically to them. They seek reassurance about finances, how their points translate, and how to apply.
5. **Factors driving HE choice.** Choice of UK HE provider is driven by course / institution, with priority factors including personal recommendations, ranking / reputation, module options, location, and financial considerations. While students do have differing perceptions of individual UK nations, these are unlikely to lead HE provider choice.
6. **A human touch.** As students research their options, they particularly value video content, student stories and direct communications to get a feel for different institutions.
7. **Visualising the experience.** As well as getting detailed information on potential courses, students are keen to visualise what their experience could look like with a given HE provider. Virtual tours (covering accommodation and the local area) and insights into day-to-day living (e.g. local facilities, cost-of-living etc.) are valued.

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

1. **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. Developing accessible content, specifically tailored for school agents, counsellors and students detailing what to expect and what's on offer.
2. **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. Those who had studied at second level in Ireland emphasised the importance of understanding the **UCAS system**. In their experience, career teachers in Ireland had limited knowledge of or experience with the UCAS system, and therefore application through UCAS was often not considered an option.
3. **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. Provide an easy to access, clear A Level to Leaving Cert Points guide – make this widely available.
4. **Financial Confusion.** Finance is also a confusing area for students. The cost of fees and the cost of living were mentioned frequently. They are unsure on the cost of living in various parts of the UK, and how this differs to Ireland. They do not know how to access scholarships or where to track this information. 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. Details on scholarships and support available could be collated and added to the British Council guides and well publicised, especially through social media which is the main source of information for prospective students. Recently, the British Council has developed and expanded the Study UK Scholarship finder tool: <https://study-uk.britishcouncil.org/scholarships-funding> and reviews and updates this tool regularly.
5. **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. This relates to practical advice such as utilities, bank accounts, travel, etc. They wanted to know how the university would help them adapt – for example student support or hearing from other international students.

UK to Ireland

The findings from this research suggest that UK students choosing to study in Ireland clearly recognise the value of UK HE providers, with almost all also applying through UCAS for a place in the UK. By and large these students are located in Ireland for personal reasons, because of ease of access and lower costs.

The interviews highlighted five areas which may have encouraged these students to further consider UK HE Providers instead of choosing to study in Ireland. Along with updating the British Council *Study in the UK Guide* to incorporate relevant findings, UK HE providers could explore greater promotion of the opportunities available under the headings below:

1. Provide a **“start-to-finish” guidance** on how to apply to study in Ireland, tailored to students from the UK, including: a detailed explanation of the CAO system; the translation of A Levels to Leaving Cert point; the fees for students at various NFQ levels of education, and any financial assistance they are eligible for.
2. Greater information on **careers** available in Ireland would also be useful. At survey stage 60% of respondents had stated that career opportunity potential was either ‘relevant’ or ‘very relevant’ to their decision to study in Ireland. However, in the course of interview students had very little to say about future careers or job prospects, even when prompted.
3. Provide greater information on **accommodation** (including dedicated housing provision for students, available lists and noticeboards, etc.) and the **cost of living in Ireland**, including clarity of information on cost of living, highlighting differences in bank, mobile phone providers, currency, etc.
4. The four-year undergraduate degree in Ireland which includes a strong emphasis on **work placements and/or Erasmus+ or Study Abroad Programmes** was welcomed by students from the UK. Greater promotion of similar opportunities in the UK could be influential in the decision-making process.
5. Mature students from Northern Ireland appeared to be less aware of opportunities for access to tertiary education through other routes in the UK. Clear information and clarity around **access for mature students** to UK universities would be considered an asset by these students.



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