
Higher Education Postgraduate Mobility: UK-Ireland

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British Embassy
Dublin

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Foreword

This research is particularly timely within the context of the UK Ireland Summit in March 2025 and more broadly in light of the UK Government’s commitment to strengthen ties with the European Union. There are also deep historical, cultural and educational ties between the two countries.

UK Ireland relations are unique within the EU due to the Common Travel Area and freedom of movement in both directions. Students from both countries benefit from home fee status in the other’s countries and yet take up and awareness of this entitlement is not as widely known as it should be. Students from Northern Ireland are also eligible for Erasmus + enabling them to study in the EU as a result of funding from the Irish Government.

This research shares new and strategic insights on UK Ireland research collaboration, student mobility, institutional engagement and alumni engagement. It sets out a series of recommendations for policy-makers and Higher Education Institutions in both countries to unlock stronger academic collaboration, partnerships and participation going forward and we look forward to engaging with partners on them.

Erika Boak
Regional Director for Education
British Council EU Region

1. Executive Summary

1. Executive summary

This study examines postgraduate mobility in higher education between the UK and Ireland. It explores the type of interventions, initiatives, and supports that would provide opportunities for postgraduate researchers (early career researchers and PhD students) in a UK-Ireland context.

The research was conducted using a mixed methods approach and included a desk analysis of relevant literature and data, plus semi-structured interviews with selected stakeholders from the UK and Ireland higher education sectors.

This study is part of British Council Ireland's research and insight work on student mobility between the UK and Ireland. It follows on from previous research on undergraduate higher education mobility flows between the UK and Ireland, launched in September 2023. The research was undertaken on behalf of the British Council by Education Insight in the UK and Southern Cross Consulting in Ireland. Previous research relating to higher education mobility between Ireland and the UK, can be found here: britishcouncil.ie/higher-education-mobility-research

The context

- Ireland and the UK have a long history of connection and mobility in higher education. Academic and student (postgraduate and undergraduate) mobility has always been a strong and influential component of this connection. In 2022/23, almost 9,500 students from Ireland were enrolled in the UK at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. An important enabler of this is the Common Travel Area between the two countries, which ensures that fees charged to students have remained at the domestic rate.
- Ireland is also the fourth most significant source country for academic staff, with 4,775 Irish academics employed by UK higher education institutions in 2022/23.
- Research collaboration between Ireland and the UK (an essential enabler of PhD and early career researcher mobility) also has a long track record. In the EU's Horizon 2020 programme, 47 per cent of projects involving Irish academic and industry organisations had a UK partner.

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The challenges

- Changes in the higher education landscape have created some significant challenges for the UK-Ireland relationship around student mobility flows and research collaborations (although fundamentally the mobility framework afforded by the Common Travel Area has remained unaffected). Chief amongst these has been the UK's exit from the European Union. This has severely impacted research collaboration and, to a lesser extent, student mobility, causing much uncertainty and halting many existing partnerships.
- There are structural mismatches in the two countries' systems (for example, differences in higher education entry requirements and timing of university offers). There are also different priorities for higher education institutions in the UK and Ireland.

The opportunities and recommendations

The study found strong interest in rekindling, supporting and strengthening relationships in research and postgraduate mobility between Ireland and the UK.

This is evidenced by a plethora of recent initiatives jointly funded by the two governments and the research councils of both countries, and significantly by the March UK-Ireland 2030 Joint Statement released by the leaders of both countries following the UK-Ireland summit in March 2025. The statement commits '*anew to delivering on the promise of our unique partnership to the benefit of current and future generations living across these islands.*'

The statement specifically commits to building on collaboration through the current Horizon European Research and Innovation Framework Programme and developing joint capabilities and expertise in several areas including peace and conflict resolution, maritime research, energy, cyber security, digital technologies and creative industries.

Our recommendations are based on the opportunities identified. We have placed particular attention on the role and contribution the British Council could make.

A summary of opportunities and recommendations follows:

- **Common Travel Area (CTA) higher education information dissemination** – across the two countries' higher education sectors, there is a pressing need for improved communication, information sharing, and understanding of each other's higher education systems, for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. A practical step forward here is for the British Council to extend the *UK Ireland higher education Guide*, including information on Ireland's updating of entry requirements to Irish universities. A further recommendation is for this guide (or an equivalent mechanism, such as a website or digital platform) to include information on the processes and steps involved in both application systems, Ireland's Central Applications Office (CAO) and the UK's Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS).
- **Short-term mobility** – mobility for postgraduate students, early career researchers, and mid-career academics is a valuable building block in capacity building, fostering bilateral relationships, wider professional networks, and future research collaborations.

The lack of an Ireland-UK partnership at Erasmus+ level has created a significant gap for students from both countries who wish to study in an English-speaking country and potentially reduces opportunities for relationship building and future research collaboration. The Irish Government's financial support to higher education providers to continue participating in Erasmus+ has enabled students from Northern Ireland to study abroad and has been positively received. To build on this, governments could investigate opportunities to further encourage short-term mobility and exchanges in the context of the CTA. The UK Turing Scheme, the Welsh Government's Taith programme and Scotland's Test and Learn are examples of devolved nation mobility initiatives that work to increase mobility in the bilateral relationship and are valuable examples for future similar initiatives. Given the relationships, connections and research interests between and across the UK devolved nations and Ireland, an expansion here could be the development of focussed Summer Schools (i.e. Welsh Irish; Scottish Irish; English Irish).

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- **Joint doctoral training** – there is scope for shared doctoral programmes and associated doctoral training. For double and joint PhDs to grow, jointly funded initiatives could be agreed upon between UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and Research Ireland. In addition to helping to facilitate discussions, the British Council might also investigate whether there are opportunities for PhD training offered jointly by Irish and UK higher education institutions in third countries. While many overseas governments have drastically reduced scholarships for overseas study, budgets for split-site and joint PhDs have increased.

Supporting this, several interviewees spoke of how undertaking a PhD can be an isolating experience and suggested the establishment of small networking grants to facilitate collaborations across the islands would be valuable. This could allow students to access additional resources and potentially build enduring networks.
- **Alumni engagement** – there is strong potential to build alumni networks that will be important for future bilateral relations. The British Council is already engaged in building this and could maintain, strengthen and expand its work in this area.
- **Research collaboration** – fostering new knowledge and partnerships and finding ways to promote research collaboration are priorities. The British Council could work alongside government and agency partners to convene or support networks of researchers and academics working in mutual areas of interest and developing a dedicated bilateral research programme fostering networks and projects. Priority could be given to strengthening Ireland-UK community engagement through highly relevant research (health and emerging technologies, peace and reconciliation, biotech, creative and cultural industries, digital humanities, environmental sustainability, biodiversity, sustainable food systems, etc.). Additionally, robust and ongoing communication regarding the UK's eligibility to associate with Horizon Europe and Copernicus programmes (from January 2024) could be combined with amplifying existing Ireland-UK research clusters and collaborative projects.

- **University partnerships** – these are an increasingly important route for postgraduate mobility and PhD and postdoctoral research. University partnerships are high on the agenda of the EU's University Alliance. UK universities have a long and successful track record here. There is a significant opportunity to facilitate partnerships between UK and Irish higher education bodies and explore the possibility of joint provision of transnational education globally and bilateral online joint programmes. This would lay a secure pathway for undergraduate students globally on programmes in their home country to move on to UK and Irish postgraduate programmes.
- **Higher education system-level cooperation** – the British Council, alongside other UK sector bodies, launched the new UK Agent Quality Framework, which relies heavily on a National Code of Ethical Practice for Education Agents. This draws on a longstanding partnership between the UK and Ireland, which dates back to 2012, when the two countries, – alongside the USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia – signed the London Statement. In September 2024, Ireland launched TrustEd, an international education quality mark. The British Council and relevant sector bodies in each location could explore points of alignment and how to drive these initiatives forward.

The Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA) (on behalf of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science) developed the *Framework for Action for Higher Education*. This framework responds to Pillar Five of Ireland's Global Impact and Global Talent Strategies and focuses on support to Ireland-UK (and Ireland-Europe) collaboration in research and mobility. It presents a timely opportunity for the British Council to offer partnership and support around some proposed initiatives.

The study concludes that, while there have been significant recent challenges to UK-Ireland postgraduate mobility and research collaboration, there is a strong interest in rekindling and strengthening connections, which is strongly supported at political levels in both countries. The British Council's role and contribution are vital factors in achieving this.

1. Introduction

1. Introduction:

In 2023, the British Council published a research insight report titled *Higher Education Mobility: UK-Ireland*. This report focused on undergraduate mobility flows between the UK and Ireland. Alongside this, the British Council produced a *Higher Education Information Guide: UK-Ireland* which offers students and universities valuable information and links to support higher education mobility.¹

To complement these, the British Council has commissioned Education Insight in the UK and Southern Cross Consulting in Ireland to explore postgraduate student flows between the UK and Ireland (in particular, of PhD students and early career researchers). The British Council in Ireland is interested in finding out how it can support postgraduate and early career academics build, maintain and sustain connection and mobility in higher education across the Common Travel Area (CTA).²

The study is timely, coinciding with the publication of Ireland's *International Talent and Innovation Strategy* (supporting Pillar Five, 'A new level of North-South and East-West Collaboration'), and with the launch of Ireland's international education quality mark, TrustEd.³

Its findings are further supported by the March 2025 UK-Ireland 2030 Joint Statement⁴ released by the leaders of both countries following the UK-Ireland summit. The statement has a focus on research, innovation and partnership and commits 'anew to delivering on the promise of our unique partnership to the benefit of current and future generations living across these islands [which will be taken forward through] a shared ambition to reach the potential of our partnership across our islands, recognising that, in a changing world beyond our shores, the benefits and significance of a stronger and more settled relationship between our two countries have never been greater.'

The statement specifically commits to building on collaboration through research co-centres (see section 2.2) and the current Horizon European Research Innovation Framework Programme, and developing joint capabilities, partnerships and expertise in a number of areas including peace and conflict resolution, maritime research, energy, cyber security, AI, digital technologies and creative industries.

The UK and Ireland share a close bilateral relationship in science, innovation and technology and commit to building on this through our collaboration within the current Horizon European Research and Innovation Framework Programme, including encouraging national contact points to work closely together. We agree to convene regular meetings between UKRI and Research Ireland to discuss issues of mutual interest...⁵

The study also intersects with other important joint Ireland and UK government commitments such as the Shared Island Initiative, the Peace Plus Programme, and the New Decade New Approach agreement.⁶

The priority challenges set out in these Statements and Programmes – achieving more connected, sustainable and prosperous islands for all communities – are ones to which higher education and research collaboration between Ireland and the UK can significantly contribute. The mobility of postgraduate students and early career researchers between the countries is essential to that collaboration and to a strong and connected future.

However, the potential here is yet to be fully realised. As a senior Irish academic commented, 'The higher education systems in Ireland and the UK, particularly at postgraduate level, are so similar it's a mystery why there isn't more interchange.'

1.1 Research aims and methodology

1.1.1 Research aim

This report summarises qualitative and quantitative data on postgraduate higher education engagement between the UK and Ireland. Its primary aim is identifying initiatives to create (or enhance) educational opportunities for postgraduate researchers to build and maintain enduring relationships between people and higher education institutions.

1.1.2 Methodology and research approach

This research follows a methodology similar to that of previous British Council research. It tracks available data over time, analyses trends and patterns in this data, and supports this with qualitative interviews with key stakeholders. This mixed methods approach was combined with a desk review of relevant literature and policy analysis.

1.1.3 Desk analysis: Data sets and relevant literature

The study explores data trends in the existing mobility of postgraduate students from Ireland to the UK. Researchers drew on two data sets from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for the UK (the Higher Education Student Record and the Aggregate Offshore Record), and on the Higher Education Authority for data from Ireland.⁷

In addition, a desk review of available relevant literature was conducted. This included analysis of key policy documents, such as the UK's *International Education Strategy*,⁸ the *Global Wales Programme*,⁹ and Scotland's *International Education Strategy*¹⁰ and *Global Citizens 2030: Ireland's International Talent and Innovation Strategy* (2024).¹¹

1 British Council - Higher Education Mobility UK and Ireland

2 Common Travel Area: rights of UK and Irish citizens

3 'Pillar Five: A new level of North-South and East-West Collaboration: Co-operation in education, research and innovation has a unique role to play in strengthening the friendships, collaborations and strategic relationships both North-South and East-West including through the Shared Island initiative and PEACEPLUS programme. It is essential to maximise the impact of Shared Island and PEACEPLUS investments to ensure learners, researchers and innovators gain experience in education and research institutions across Ireland and the UK. Informed by the unified tertiary system strategy, sustainable cross-border delivery structures will be built, including cross-border apprenticeships, common skills forecasting models, and joint programmes which can meet the shared needs, North and South on the island of Ireland. Global Citizens 2030 will also foster purposeful collaborations for all-island talent and innovation to underpin an era of enhanced co-operation on a North-South and East-West (UK) basis. Development of new mobility and exchange schemes for learners, researchers and innovators between Ireland, Northern Ireland and the rest of United Kingdom is the flagship initiative for this pillar.' Global Citizens 2030, Ireland's International Talent and Innovation Strategy: Enhancing Ireland's global influence through excellence and inclusion in talent and innovation (2024) and TrustEd: A new benchmark for international education

4 UK-Ireland 2030 Joint Statement - March 6 2025

5 UK-Ireland 2030 Joint Statement - March 6 2025

6 Gov.ie: Shared Island Initiative; SEUPB, PEACEPLUS cross border programme; Gov.UK, New Decade New Approach.

7 Higher Education Statistics Agency UK and Higher Education Authority Ireland

8 Gov.UK International Education Strategy (2023 progress update)

9 Global Wales

10 Scotland's International Education Strategy

11 Global Citizens 2030, Ireland's International Talent and Innovation Strategy: Enhancing Ireland's global influence through excellence and inclusion in talent and innovation (2024)

1.1.4 Qualitative data collection

Qualitative semi-structured interviews complemented the data analysis. The semi-structured interviews focused on the interviewees' experiences and reflections on their current engagement at the postgraduate level.

The semi-structured interviews were guided by the following terms of reference, which were adapted to the context of the interviewees:

- Description of current higher education engagement between Ireland and the UK (probing questions for opportunities and any challenges following the end of the transition period of the UK leaving the EU).
- Exploration of opportunities for engagement between the UK and Ireland following the launch of Ireland's new *Global Citizens 2030 Ireland's International Talent and Innovation Strategy* (2024)¹² – gauging the levels of interest and potential for engagement from the UK and Ireland.
- Opportunities for engagement in the short term and the long term.
- Exploration of system-level cooperation.
- The role of government departments.
- The role of research funding bodies (Research Ireland¹³, UK Research and Innovation¹⁴).
- The role of agencies and representative bodies (for example, The British Council, Taith in Wales,¹⁵ UK Universities, the Higher Education Authority, Irish Universities Association¹⁶).
- The role of national sector associations.
- The role of research funding bodies (Research Ireland, UK Research Innovation [UKRI]).

To best understand the stakeholders' needs and identify the opportunities for postgraduate higher education engagement between the two nations, this research carried out semi-structured interviews with the following stakeholder groups:

- British Council.
- National Agencies in the UK – Taith, UK Research and Innovation.
- UK university leaders.
- UK PhD students in Ireland.
- Government departments in Ireland.
- PhD students in the UK from Ireland.
- National agencies and sector bodies in Ireland (Research Ireland; Irish Universities Association, HEA, Enterprise Ireland).
- Irish university leaders.

1.1.5 Research limitations

The study took place over a short timeframe and aimed to offer a snapshot of views. Only some of the relevant actors across the sectors in the UK and Ireland could be interviewed. In particular, the timeframe made securing interviews with PhD students and early career researchers difficult. At the postgraduate student level, this study focused on PhD researchers as a stakeholder group with a high likelihood of joining the academic workforce in Irish or UK higher education.

1.1.6 Target audience

This research is intended to assist the British Council to inform priorities and activities in higher education over the next three years and to generate insight on mobility and future possibilities for stakeholders interested in UK-Ireland higher education relations, including, but not limited to the following:

- Universities UK.
- UK Research and Innovation.
- British Universities International Liaison Association.
- UK Department of Education and the Foreign Commonwealth Development Office.
- British Irish Chamber of Commerce Higher Education Research Committee.
- Research Ireland.
- Enterprise Ireland (Education in Ireland).
- Higher Education Authority (Ireland).
- Irish Universities Association.
- Technological Higher Education Association (Ireland).
- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in Ireland.
- Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Ireland.

¹² *Global Citizens 2030: Ireland's International Talent and Innovation Strategy*

¹³ Research Ireland was established in August 2024 following an amalgamation of the Research Ireland (RI) and Science Foundation Ireland (SFI)

¹⁴ UK Research and Innovation

¹⁵ Taith Wales

¹⁶ Irish Universities Association



2. UK-Ireland higher education relationship: Shifting landscapes

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2.1 The context

Ease of mobility and access to education systems in both countries are facilitated by a shared language and history. This is supported by the CTA which facilitates the long-standing principle of reciprocal rights and facilitation of movement of British and Irish citizens between the countries, including access to higher education systems. Students in both countries therefore qualify for domestic-rate tuition fees, and no study visas are required.

The past five years have seen considerable changes and challenges for higher education institutions in both the UK and Ireland. These have impacted institutions and the academic relationships between Irish and UK institutions.

In the UK, almost a third of higher education institutions have announced redundancies, downsizing, and department closures – mainly in performing arts, mathematics, and modern and foreign languages. Unsurprisingly, UK stakeholders interviewed concentrated on the financial pressures universities face. The UK government has recently announced that maximum fees for standard full-time courses in England will rise by 3.1 per cent to £9,535 for the academic year 2025/26.¹⁷ However, up to 2024/25, tuition fees for home students remained almost unchanged for 12 years, except for a minor uplift of £250 in 2017 when they reached £9,250. Inflationary pressures resulted in a 30 per cent depreciation of the tuition fee income, which, combined with reductions in research funding, has increased the reliance of higher education institutions on international tuition fees.

The UK Office for Students' report on the financial sustainability of higher education providers in England shows that income is mainly attributed to increases in tuition fee income from international students.¹⁸ The Office for Students also projects that up to 72 per cent of the higher education institutions in England will face budget deficits in 2025/26. While tuition fees vary in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, universities across the UK devolved nations face similar challenges with high reliance on international student fees as their English counterparts. This is further compounded by significant uncertainty resulting from global competition in higher education and recent announcements regarding international students in the UK.

Over the past five years in Ireland, international student numbers in higher education institutions have increased significantly from just under 30,000 in 2019/20 to over 40,000 in 2023/24 (and this despite funding for international engagement remaining low by international standards).

In January 2024, the Irish Government launched *Global Citizens 2030: Ireland's International Talent and Innovation Strategy*, encompassing the country's tertiary education, research and innovation systems. This sets out plans to attract global talent by becoming a 'first choice' destination for international students and researchers. It aims to grow the number of international students, researchers and innovators in the country by 10 per cent by 2030. While interviewees from Ireland expressed optimism about this, seeing it as an indication that government has a focus on internationalising higher education, they pointed to accommodation pressures (a weak supply exacerbated by high levels of immigration and a demographic boom), which limit the availability of places. They saw this as a primary reason for *Global Citizens 2030* not committing to a more significant growth in international student numbers. Also, while interviewees appreciated the greater emphasis on east-west (and north-south) cooperation, in common with their counterparts in the UK, they considered that funding for higher education continued to be inadequate, with several HE institutions in Ireland facing financial difficulties.¹⁹

Over and above all these concerns was the UK's withdrawal from the European Union. For stakeholders in both countries, this was the most critical challenge to the UK-Ireland higher education relationship. The 2016 referendum and formal exit from the EU in 2020/21 caused significant uncertainty about the future of research collaboration and researcher mobility between the two countries.²⁰ Over the life of the EU Horizon 2020 programme, 47 per cent of projects involving Irish academic and industry organisations had a UK partner. The delay in decisions about joining the EU's new Horizon Programme meant that many longstanding arrangements were halted.

In the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, concluded in December 2020, the door was left open to the UK subsequently rejoining EU programmes, such as Horizon, and in September 2023, the UK government announced plans to associate with Horizon Europe and Copernicus programmes starting in January 2024.²¹ As noted above, the March 2025 Joint UK Ireland Statement is supporting renewed collaboration through the Horizon Programme.

Against this backdrop, the analysis below focuses mainly on the context for postgraduate research collaboration and mobility flows between the UK and Ireland.

¹⁹ University World News; Leadership crisis at two universities sparked by financial crisis

²⁰ The UK formally left the EU on 31 Jan 2020. The end of the transition period was 31 Jan 2021.

²¹ Gov.UK: Overwhelming support for UK's Horizon Deal

¹⁷ The Education Hub

¹⁸ Office for Students - Financial sustainability of higher education providers in England 2024

2.2. Research collaboration

Research collaboration between the UK and Ireland has evolved over many years, fostering innovative projects, advancing scientific knowledge and building many academic networks and people-to-people as well as institution-to-institution relationships. These provide important opportunities for the mobility of early career researchers. Joint initiatives, including co-research centres, collaborative programmes and awards, bilateral research projects and publications mark this collaboration. Recent examples highlight the depth and continuing nature of this collaboration:

- In November 2023, in the margins of a meeting of the British Irish Intergovernmental Conference, the two countries announced €70 million in joint funding to create two new research centres on climate and biodiversity and sustainable and resilient food systems²².
- The two co-centres formally commenced research activities in January 2024 and will be funded until 2030. Collectively, they bring funding of up to €40 million from Research Ireland, up to £17 million from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland and up to £12 million channelled through UKRI. The initiative is co-funded by industry. The March 2025 Joint Statement reaffirms commitment to this approach: *‘In early 2024, we launched the research Co-Centre for Climate, Biodiversity & Water, seeking to deliver solutions to the pressing challenges posed by climate change, biodiversity decline, and water degradation; and the Co-Centre for Sustainable Food Systems, seeking to drive societal and political change in food system transformation and transition to climate neutrality by 2050. Following the launch of these Co-Centres, UKRI and Research Ireland will work together and*

*with the Northern Ireland Executive to monitor progress and identify future opportunities to bring together researchers and innovators across the UK and Ireland.’*²³

- Similarly to the co-centres initiative, the North-South Research Programme falls under the Irish Government’s *Research and Innovation Strategy (Impact 2030)* and is funded through the Shared Island Initiative.²⁴ It is implemented by the HEA and supports projects delivering an all-island approach to research and innovation, which strengthen links between higher education institutions, research communities and researchers across the island of Ireland. The current call aims to build on research partnerships and support emerging hubs of excellence. Funding for the current call is €55 million.²⁵
- The European Union’s Humanities in the European Research Area programme includes significant contributions from UK and Irish researchers. This collaboration focuses on humanities research, emphasising the societal impact and promoting cultural and academic exchange between the two nations.

- Research collaboration between Research Ireland and the UK Economic and Social Research Council is another area of strength. Bilateral funding supported 20 research projects, covering mental health, children’s welfare, public health, and data protection.²⁶ The funding aims to support the long-term relationships between UK-based and Ireland-based social science researchers and encourage new partnerships.
- Research Ireland and UKRI have jointly established the UK-Ireland research funders’ forum to enable regular strategic dialogue.²⁷
- Collaboration in the fields of culture, heritage and creative industries has always been important across the islands. The March 2025 Joint Statement acknowledges: *‘the extraordinary influence and contribution of British and Irish cultures and heritages to the artistic and cultural wealth of the public realm and creative industries and institutions in both our countries’*. The statement commits to the establishment of *‘a strategic partnership to deepen and amplify co-operation between our leading cultural institutions and to support... a range of measures [including] collaborations in programming, professional exchange, research and policy...’*²⁸
- Research Ireland and UKRI have jointly funded several important research programmes in the area of digital humanities. One prominent example is the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the UK (AHRC) and Research Ireland’s Digital Humanities Programme, agreed in 2020. The programme funded 12 research networking grants, and 11 major research grants designed to build on the strengths of digital humanities in Ireland and the UK, leading to new partnerships, cross-disciplinary projects, capacity building and enhanced integration of humanities and technology.²⁹
- The AHRC and Research Ireland are continuing to collaborate and develop future initiatives to support bilateral research between the UK and Ireland. In January 2025 the organisations jointly hosted a scoping workshop to identify new opportunities for interdisciplinary bilateral collaboration in research in the creative industries. The workshop was viewed as *a ‘first step in developing a pathway to a programme that will exploit complementary areas of excellence in the creative industries in both countries, with a view to new and sustainable collaborations and strengthening of world-class research capacity across UK and Irish creative research institutions.’*³⁰
- In 2023, the UK’s Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) and Research Ireland entered an agreement to *‘welcome, encourage and support research applications that cut across national boundaries involving collaborative teams led by researchers from the UK and Ireland’*. This new partnership supports joint research and technology development in all areas of EPSRC’s remit (chemistry, engineering, information and communications technologies, materials, mathematical sciences and physics). Under the agreement, UK-based research groups will be funded by EPSRC and Ireland-based research groups will be funded by Research Ireland.³¹

22 SFI: €70 million announced for research centres
23 UK-Ireland 2030 Joint Statement - March 6 2025
24 Pillar 5 of Impact 2030 (Ireland’s Research and Innovation Strategy) focuses on All-Island, EU and Global Connectivity.
25 North South Research Programme
26 UKRI: Twenty UK-Ireland research collaborations in social science announced
27 UK-Ireland Research Funders’ Forum
28 UK-Ireland 2030 Joint Statement - March 6 2025
29 AHRC-IRC Collaboration in Digital Humanities
30 AHRC-Research Ireland: UK/Ireland Creative Industries Scoping Workshop 29 January 2025
31 EPSRC-Research Ireland Joint Funding of Research

- Further initiatives exist between Ireland and the UK's devolved nations. There have been, for example, strong links between Scotland and Ireland in science. By the end of 2018, 102 collaborations with researchers based in Scotland were supported by Science Foundation Ireland (SFI). In 2019, SFI hosted a meeting between the Scottish Funding Council and the Irish Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation, to open a dialogue for more formal engagement between the two national bodies. This was seen to be of particular importance because of the changes in access to EU funding, and in interviews for this study, Research Ireland noted that new collaboration agreements with Scotland are likely to be considered in the near future. One possible future conduit for collaboration is Scotland's new Higher Education International Partnerships group.³² Research Ireland collaboration with Scottish researchers is also facilitated through UKRI and other funding bodies.
- There is also collaboration between Ireland and Scotland in the humanities and social sciences. One example is the Ireland-Scotland bilateral network grants, an initiative of the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) and the Royal Society of Edinburgh, which is supported by the Scottish Government Office in Ireland and the Department of Foreign Affairs. This initiative is one of the opportunities identified in the 2021 to 2025 *Scotland-Ireland bilateral review report*.³³ The network grant aims to strengthen cooperation and learning between researchers, academics and practitioners in Scotland and Ireland. The funding round in 2023 addressed the theme of 'Rural, Coastal, and/or Island Communities' and invited applications from across the subject areas of humanities and social sciences.
- An interesting approach which is based on the research priorities of both governments is the new Research Ireland Wales Innovation Network Research Alliance Award – a supplementary fund to active RI grants which provides seed funding to develop competitive cross-border bids for EU Horizon grant applications. The funding is to support collaborations between researchers in Ireland and Wales. RI acts as the lead agency on applications, with Welsh research groups funded by WIN, and Irish research groups funded by RI.³⁴
- The Celtic Academies Alliance illustrates the potential for focusing on niche areas of shared expertise. The alliance, convened by the RIA (an Island of Ireland body), brings together the '*national academies of Ireland, Scotland and Wales to further promote and encourage co-operation, collaboration and shared learning across the three academic and research systems*.' The alliance has the specific goal of supporting 'the evolution of more effective intra-UK and UK-Ireland governance' in academia.³⁵
- The British Irish Chamber of Commerce's annual Higher Education and Research Conference offers an important opportunity for co-operation and networking across both countries. The 2024 conference 'Reaching New Horizons Together' focussed on partnerships for collaboration and welcomed strong representation from business, government and academia. The June 2025 Conference to be held in London will explore research partnership opportunities.³⁶

- Academic staff mobility between Ireland and the UK has always been significant. In the UK, Ireland is the fourth largest provider of academic staff to UK institutions (after China, Italy, and Germany). At present, almost 5,000 Irish academic staff are employed by UK higher education institutions.³⁷

Interviewees suggested that the UK's withdrawal from the EU had increased the number of UK academics and research teams relocating to Ireland. One interviewee referred to these as 'the Brexit refugees'. There is, however, no accurate data available on the number of UK academics in Ireland at this time.

³² Connected Scotland

³³ Scottish Government: Scotland-Ireland bilateral review report

³⁴ Research Ireland Wales Innovation Network Research Alliance Award

³⁵ Royal Irish Academy - Celtic Academies Alliance

³⁶ Annual High-level Conference - British Irish Chamber

³⁷ Universities UK Higher Education Data-International Staff

2.3 Student mobility

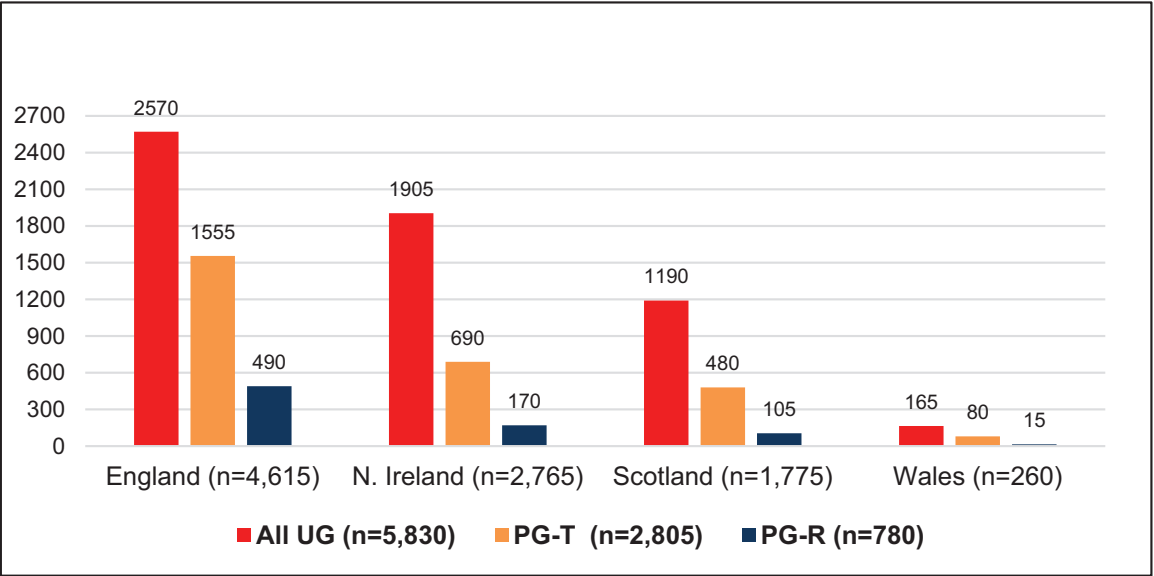
Student mobility has always been influential across the islands. Recent reports from the British Council in Ireland examined undergraduate student mobility between Ireland and the UK. These reports and national data from both countries have been used to inform our analysis.³⁸

Our reflections below include undergraduate and postgraduate students, essentially because undergraduate study is the vital underpinning of the student journey to PhD study and postdoctoral research. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that students’ choice of university for undergraduate studies influences their choice for PhD study. In the following sections, we have considered the broader student journey, mapping changes from undergraduate to PhD level.

2.3.1 Students from Ireland in the UK³⁹

As illustrated by Figure 1, which includes part-time and full-time study, almost 9,500 students from Ireland are currently enrolled in UK higher education institutions. Of these, as Figure 2 shows, 80 per cent (7,520) are full-time students.

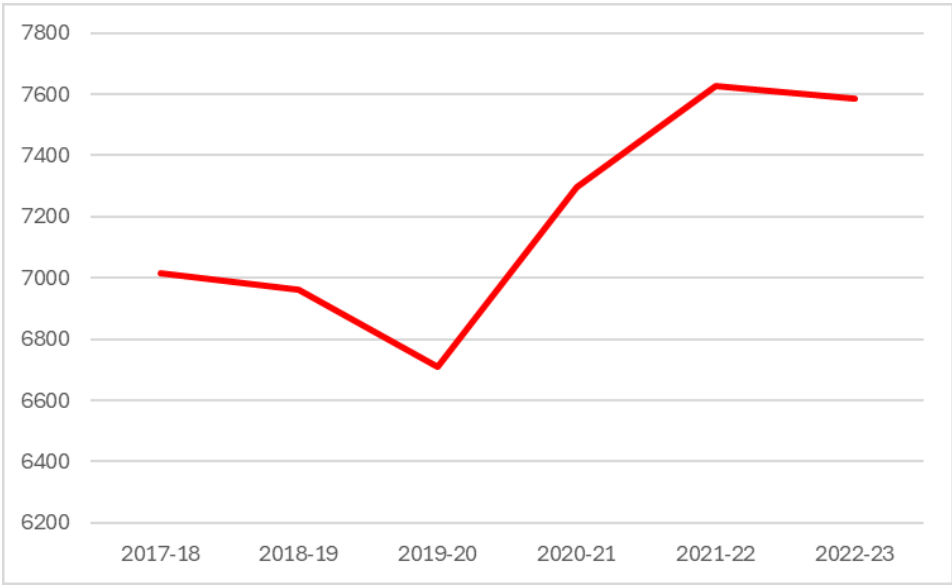
Figure 1: Students from Ireland enrolled in UK higher education 2022/23 (HESA 2025)



38 British Council - Higher Education Mobility UK and Ireland

39 All data presented in this section is taken from the UK HESA Student Record or from UCAS

Figure 2: Full-time students from Ireland enrolled in UK higher education, 2017/18 to 2022/23 (HESA 2025)



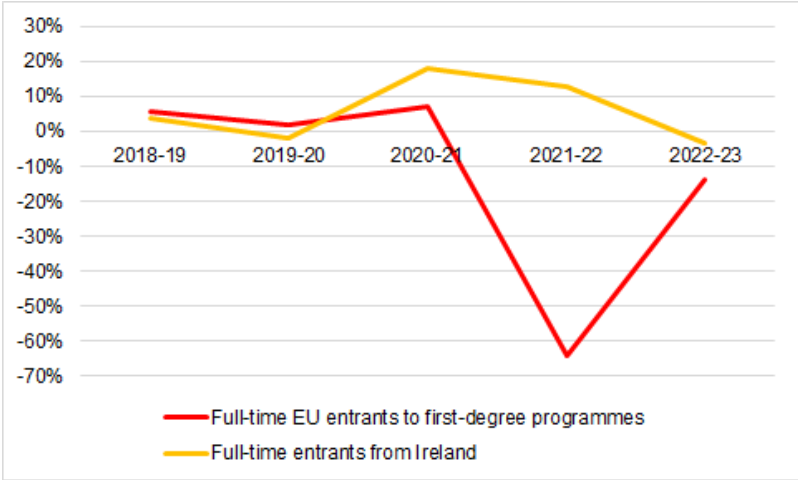
While enrolment numbers from Ireland declined by around 4 per cent between 2021/22 and 2022/23, the latest UCAS application data shows that Ireland is the fourth most important source of applications for the 2025/26 academic year (see Table 1).

Table 1: Applications to UK higher education 2025/26 (UCAS 2025)

Country	Jan. 2025 cycle applications	Net change	% change	Previous year's growth
China	31,160	+2,540	+8.9%	+3.3%
India	8,740	-30	-0.3%	-3.9%
United States	6,680	+700	+11.7%	+3.1%
Ireland	5,750	+760	+15.2%	-0.4%

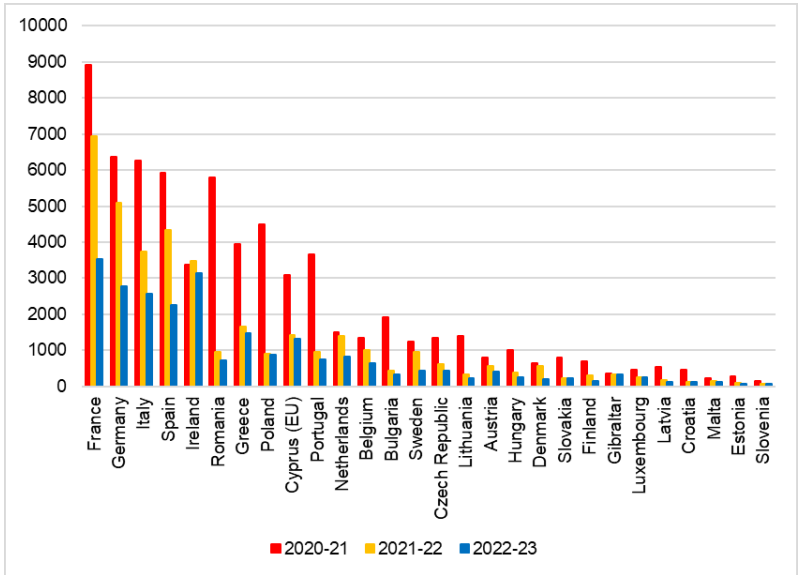
The end of the transition period of the UK’s exit from the EU marked a significant decline in EU student demand for UK higher education. EU full-time entrants dipped by 63 per cent (42,390 students) overall between 2020/21 and 2022/23. While growth from Ireland slowed down in this period (by 7 per cent, 235 entrants), Ireland registered the smallest decline, as evidenced by Figure 3, showing change in entrance patterns to first-degree programmes. As noted, because of the CTA agreement, students from Ireland qualify for domestic-rate tuition fees and do not require a visa to study in the UK, putting them in a different category from other EU students.

Figure 3: Full-time EU entrants to UK higher education, 2020/21 to 2022/23 (HESA 2025)



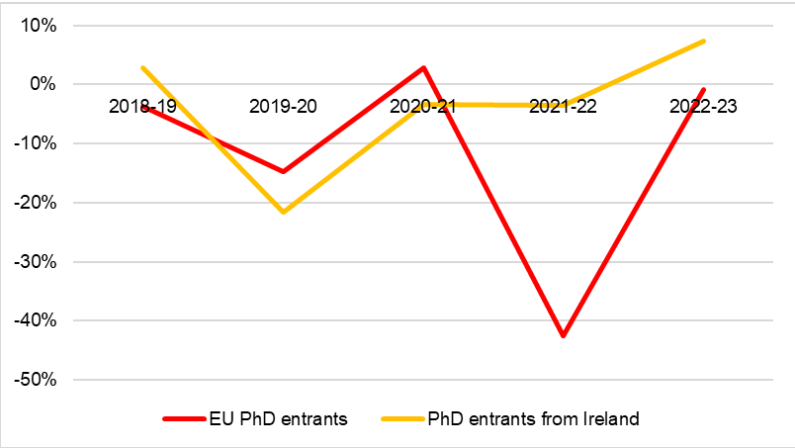
As Figure 4 highlights, Ireland is now the second most important EU source country for the UK.⁴⁰ Following a dip in student enrolment numbers in 2019/20, full-time students from Ireland in the UK bounced back strongly, with nearly 7,600 full-time students from Ireland in UK higher education in 2022/23.

Figure 4: Full-time EU entrants to UK higher education, 2020/21 to 2022/23 (HESA 2025)



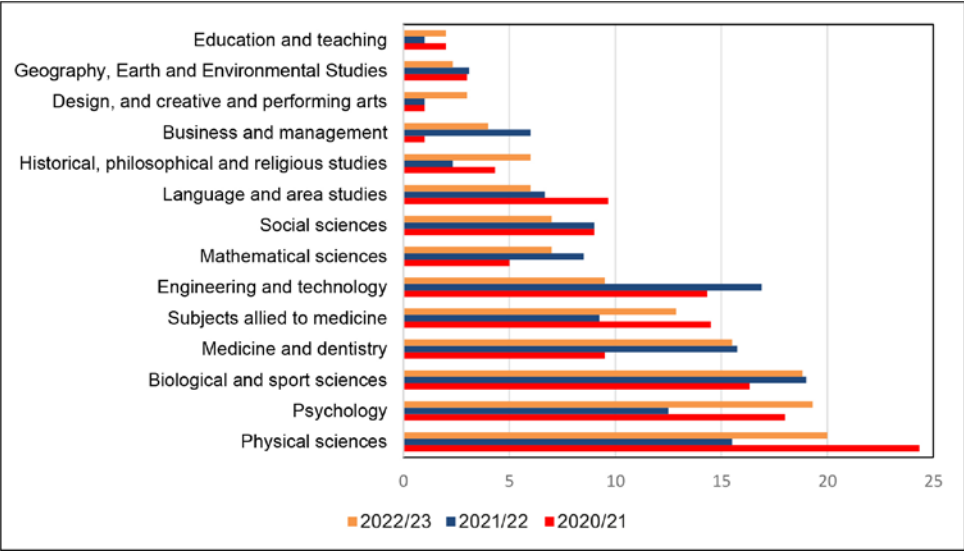
⁴⁰ In the course of our interviews, it became clear that students from Northern Ireland studying in England, Scotland or Wales can use their Irish passports when registering – their domicile is therefore noted as Ireland. It is not possible to estimate the number of students this may apply to.

Figure 5: Year-on-year change in demand for PhDs in the UK 2020/21 to 2022/23 (HESA 2025)



A similar pattern emerges for PhD programmes. As Figure 5 shows, following a decline in 2019/20, the number of students from Ireland studying at this level in the UK is now similar to 2018 levels, whereas PhD candidates from other EU countries have declined by over 40 per cent.

Figure 6: PhD subject choice for students from Ireland in the UK, 2020/21 to 2022/23 (HESA 2025)

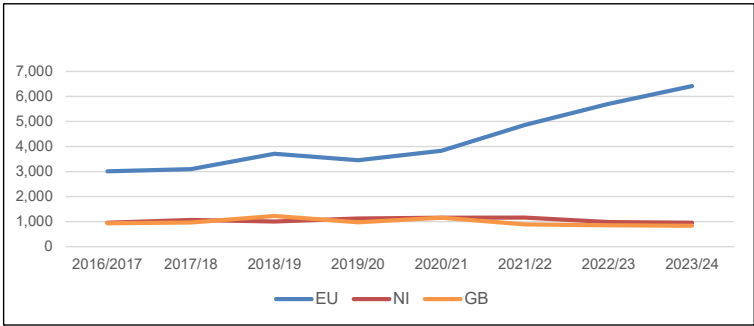


PhD demand for students from Ireland is concentrated in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM subjects), and many doctoral candidates are located in higher education institutions in Northern Ireland and Scotland. Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast hosted 26 per cent of all full-time students from Ireland in 2021/22.

2.3.2 Students from the UK in Ireland⁴¹

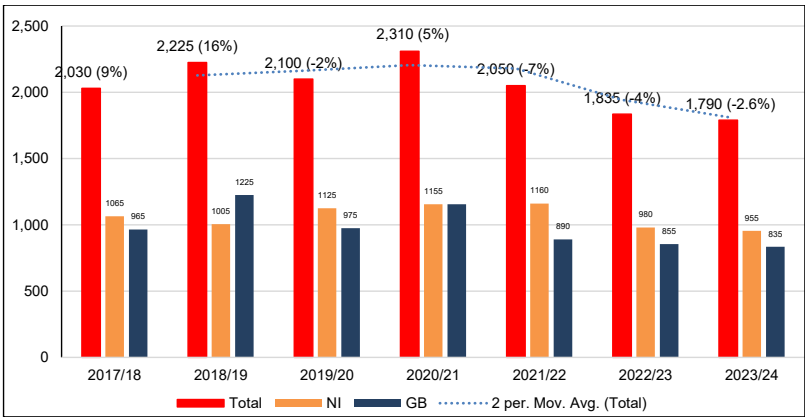
While student numbers from EU countries enrolling in full-time higher education in Ireland are growing at over 10 per cent per year, enrolments from the UK are declining, as evidenced by Figure 7.

Figure 7: Full-time EU, NI and GB HE enrolments in Ireland, 2017/18 to 2023/24 (HEA)



Focusing on full-time UK higher education enrolments in Ireland over the last seven years, Figure 8 illustrates uneven and declining enrolment patterns, especially since 2020/21, when enrolments dropped from 2,310 to 1,790 in 2023/24. Enrolments from Northern Ireland were generally stable up to 2021/22 but have shown a decline over the last two years.

Figure 8: Full-time students from the UK in Ireland HE, 2017/18 to 2023/4 (HEA)



Application data, as well as new entrant data, for full-time students demonstrates similar declining patterns for both Great Britain and Northern Ireland, with NI numbers showing signs of growth up to 2020/21 but reducing since.⁴²

⁴¹ All data presented in this section is taken from the Higher Education Authority (HEA Ireland - enrolment data) and the Central Application Office (CAO Ireland - application data). HEA data categorises UK students' origin as Northern Ireland (NI) or Great Britain (GB). Further disaggregation is not available currently.

⁴² British Council - Higher Education Mobility UK and Ireland

Figure 9: Applications from UK to higher education in Ireland 2024/25 (CAO)

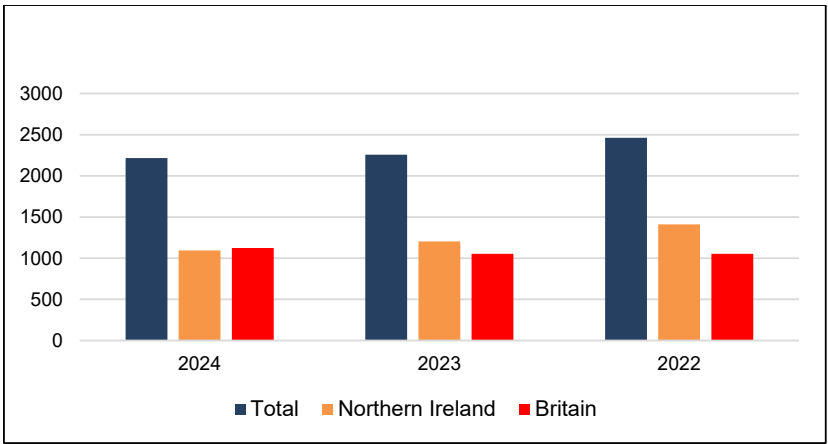
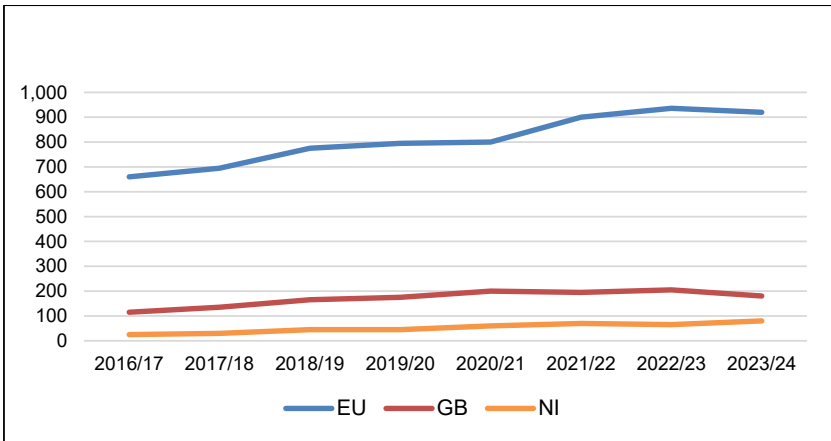


Figure 9 shows applications for undergraduate study in Ireland from Northern Ireland and Great Britain and reveals an overall decline of around 10 per cent with consistent decreases in numbers of students from NI applying (-14 per cent in 2024). An increase is evident in the number of students from GB applying (+16 per cent in 2024), but this is not reflected in enrolments.

Figure 10: Full-time PhD EU and UK students in HE in Ireland, 2017/18 to 2023/4 (HEA)



As illustrated by Figure 10, enrolments in PhD programmes from students from Northern Ireland and Great Britain show a similar pattern to other levels, with numbers plateauing over the last three years and dropping by 3 per cent in 2023/24. As with students from Ireland in the UK, PhD students from the UK in Ireland are focused on STEM subjects, but there is a greater concentration on arts and humanities and health and welfare fields.

Although Trinity College Dublin is the top Irish higher education institution choice for all UK students, students from Northern Ireland tend to favour institutions closer to home, such as Dundalk Institute of Technology and Atlantic Technological University (with campuses in Donegal and Sligo). Students from Great Britain strongly favour Dublin-based higher education institutions (Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, Dublin City University, and Technological University Dublin).

Declines in enrolment are evident across all levels of study, particularly at undergraduate level and for students from Great Britain.

In 2023, the British Council in Ireland, in partnership with the British Embassy, and the Economic and Social Research Institute, in partnership with the Shared Island Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach, published new research on undergraduate student mobility between Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Great Britain.⁴³ Drawing on statistical and administrative data as well as stakeholder interviews, both studies revealed relatively low levels of student mobility between Ireland and Northern Ireland, influenced by differences in higher education entry requirements, cultural preferences, accommodation and living costs, and, in Northern Ireland, by the cap on university places.

A working group of Irish universities was established to develop measures regarding equivalences in the entry requirements between the jurisdictions. As only 3 per cent of A-level students in Northern Ireland take four A-levels, it has been recommended that the current requirement be changed from four A-levels to three plus one A star level. Key recommendations that have been accepted by government include:

- It will no longer be necessary to take four A-levels to achieve maximum points (625) under Ireland’s system for third level entry.
- Students from Northern Ireland can use their best three A-levels, along with a fourth A-level, an Extended Project, or an AS subject. This means that applicants can attain a score of 600 points with three A-levels and one AS, and 625 points if one of the A-levels is maths.
- Students from Northern Ireland who apply with two A-levels and one or two AS levels will also be considered for a place in an Irish university.⁴⁴

These recommendations are further supported by a 2022 Irish government report on North-South Student Enrolment, which includes 11 broad recommendations aimed at encouraging and facilitating more students from Northern Ireland (and thereby GB) to study in Ireland. The Joint Committee on Education’s recommendations are highlighted in Table 2 and include tasking the HEA with responsibility for the promotion of cross-border HE enrolment (and SOLAS⁴⁵ for further education), setting enrolment targets, increasing research funding and the implementation of a sustainable funding model for HE.⁴⁶

Table 2: Recommendations of the Irish Government Joint Committee on Education (July 2022)

1. Task the HEA and SOLAS with the promotion of cross-border student enrolment.	
2. Set government targets for cross-border enrolment in further and higher education.	7. Deliver on commitments made in New Decade New Approach.
3. Promotion and outreach campaign run in collaboration with the NI Executive.	8. Increase north-south research funding.
4. Adjust grade equivalences and matriculation to support cross-border enrolment.	9. The timely implementation of a sustainable funding model for higher education.
5. Ensure consistency in access to supports and pathways for students enrolling cross-border.	10. Publish new student accommodation strategy.
6. Provide a Brexit guarantee to give certainty to all current and prospective students.	11. Increase cross-border public transport links.

⁴³ British Council - Higher Education Mobility UK and Ireland and ESRI - Institutional barriers limit cross-border mobility

⁴⁴ Gov.ie: Minister Harris receives Universities Ireland report recommending changes for students from Northern Ireland to access education

⁴⁵ State agency responsible for Further Education and Training in Ireland

⁴⁶ North South Enrolment in Tertiary Education. Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (July 2022)



3. Challenges and opportunities for UK-Ireland engagement: Emerging themes

3. Challenges & opportunities for UK-Ireland engagement: Emerging themes

While the report focused on postgraduate mobility, interviewees also discussed undergraduate mobility. Many perceived the challenges (discussed above) and opportunities at the undergraduate level to be instrumental in shaping those at the postgraduate level. These are, therefore, reflected in 3.1 and 3.2 below.

3.1 Challenges to higher education engagement

Several challenges were expressed during the research interviews, at both government and sector levels, and ranging from political to practical difficulties. Principal amongst them was the UK's withdrawal from the European Union.

3.1.1 Government-level challenges

- The UK's exit from the EU immediately impacted the UK-Ireland relationship in Erasmus+ mobility options for Irish students, research collaboration and the mobility flows that grow and support this. One interviewee summarised this succinctly:

'Ireland perceives the UK as a close and influential neighbour. The two countries share a common language and culture and have strong links at all levels. However, the UK's exit from the European Union has had a profound operational impact. Brexit didn't change this sentiment but removed the fuel to drive it. While the UK was a member of the EU, it was consistently Ireland's number one partner for the big EU-funded programmes (all of Ireland's projects had the UK as a partner). Brexit created a gap – Irish academics increasingly withdrew from writing bids with UK partners because of the risk involved. The UK slipped from first to eighth place as a partner. Some other countries have proactively sought partners in Ireland (often because the absence of UK partners also left a big gap for them).'

- Interviews reinforced how difficult it is to disentangle Ireland's higher education relationship with the UK from its relationship with the EU. The Ireland-UK relationship is seen by many as inherently linked to the EU-UK relationship, and it was recognised that strengthening both would be important.
- The Irish Government's recognition of Erasmus+ has been an important north-south driver of mobility. In July 2023, the Irish government announced support for Northern Ireland student mobility to Europe through support to higher education providers in Northern Ireland (including regional colleges where up to 10 per cent of higher education in Northern Ireland is delivered) to continue participating in the Erasmus+ programme.⁴⁷ This has enabled students from Northern Ireland to study abroad and also benefits EU students enrolled in universities across the island of Ireland.
- The loss of the UK as a potential Erasmus+ destination has created a significant gap for students from Ireland. For a number of reasons (including language, proximity, familiarity and wide programme availability), the UK, prior to Brexit, was the top choice for students from Ireland considering Erasmus+. For many students from Ireland, especially those without fluency in a European language, few other countries offer the perceived benefits of the UK. In a broader context, the lack of Ireland-UK partnership at Erasmus+ level potentially reduces opportunities for relationship building and future research collaboration.

3.1.2 Sector and institutional-level challenges

- A structural mismatch is Ireland's relatively late undergraduate place allocation, combined with rising pressures on accommodation and issues around the equivalence system, which many interviewees felt impacted postgraduate mobility.
- Additionally, a number of academics noted different pressures across the systems: while academics in the UK are strongly focused on the Research Excellence Framework (the UK's system for assessing research excellence, whose outcomes inform the allocation of most public funding for universities' research), there is less pressure within the Irish HE system.
- In May 2019, the UK and Irish governments signed a new memorandum on the Common Travel Area Agreement (which was reaffirmed in the March 2025 Joint Statement). The CTA guarantees that British and Irish people will continue to access education institutions in both countries.⁴⁸ Despite continued communications from both governments about the CTA, interviewees noted examples of staff at some UK universities not being aware of this. While recognising that this will often be about communication gaps inside individual institutions, interviewees suggested that the British Council could use its extensive network across the CTA in UK universities to continue to communicate the CTA, in particular to staff in admissions and international offices.
- Despite Ireland being the UK's second most important source country for students from the EU, it is not a priority recruitment country for UK universities because students from Ireland pay domestic tuition fees. Similarly, students from the UK are not a priority for Irish higher education providers as they do not pay fees at undergraduate level and pay 'EU' fees at postgraduate levels.

Higher education institutions' reliance on financial income from international student fees in both countries means institutions necessarily prioritise resources for promoting students in the highly competitive global student markets. Indeed - although the market sizes vary significantly - fierce competition means that Irish and UK universities compete in the same markets (and that universities in Ireland and Northern Ireland compete with each other). This has pushed the relative importance of UK-Irish HE relations further down the geographical priorities for most universities.

3.2 Opportunities for higher education engagement

Regardless of the challenges, stakeholders saw considerable advantages in renewing and strengthening UK-Ireland higher education relationships, particularly in postgraduate and research areas. This optimism is significantly bolstered by the positive tone of the March 2025 UK-Ireland 2030 Joint Statement, which focuses on co-operation, partnership and collaboration across the islands, placing education, training, mobility and research at its very core.

*'In order to build stronger connectivity amongst our children and young people, we will also encourage greater co-operation and contact between our schools and education systems... We will promote greater understanding of educational opportunities for full-time students through improved knowledge, guidance and information using higher education entrance systems.'*⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Gov.ie: Minister Harris announces mobility funding for Northern Ireland higher education students

⁴⁸ Gov.UK: British and Irish young people guaranteed continued access to education institutions and Gov.UK: The Common Travel Area and the special status of Irish citizens in UK law

⁴⁹ UK-Ireland 2030 Joint Statement - March 6 2025

New opportunities for engagement also arise through the implementation of the HEA’s forthcoming *Framework for Action* with the HE sector, which seeks to both address the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Education (2022, see Table 2 above) and to support the achievement of the goals of Pillar Five of the *Global Talent Strategy*, aimed at facilitating further co-operation with Northern Ireland, Great Britain and Europe. The Framework is expected to be finalised by 2025.

Our research points to the following specific areas of opportunity for strengthened engagement:

- information dissemination
- short-term mobility opportunities
- collaborative doctoral training
- alumni engagement
- research cooperation
- university partnerships
- higher education sector-level cooperation.

3.2.1 Information dissemination

Across the two countries’ higher education sectors, there is a pressing need for improved communication, information sharing, and understanding of each other’s higher education systems for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. It was highlighted that currently students find it difficult to source information on grade translation and equivalence in order to study in each other’s jurisdiction. This was also highlighted in previous interviews with undergraduate students and potential applicants in British Council Ireland’s 2023 research on undergraduate mobility flows.

A practical solution is for greater amplification and visibility of existing information, such as the British Council’s extension of the *UK Ireland Higher Education Information Guide*. A further recommendation would be for this guide (or an equivalent mechanism such as a website or digital platform) to include information for postgraduate students as well as on the CAO and UCAS application systems. Knowledge of each country’s application process in the other is poor. A well-publicised and accessible portal or guide in each provides a step-by-step guide to the university application process in the other’s jurisdiction, along with advice relating to specifics such as personal statements, conditional letters of offer (such as in the UK system) or change of mind, programme prioritisation and selection (such as in the Irish system), and includes important new measures such as updating entry requirements to Irish universities for students who have taken A-levels and other specifics relating to postgraduate applications.

3.2.2 Focus on short-term mobility

UK and Irish stakeholders agreed that short-term mobility – inbound and outbound – is of huge importance. It needs the most attention and offers significant opportunities for improvement (despite the UK’s exit from the EU not affecting the fundamental basis of mobility across the UK and Ireland, namely the CTA). They suggested addressing the sensitivities around disrupted patterns of mobility should be an immediate priority.

After the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union, the UK government set up the Turing Scheme to fund outward international mobility for UK students. Ireland is the 38th most popular Turing destination at present, but given the advantages it offers UK students in terms of language, proximity, and similar HE systems, it was agreed that more could be done to promote Ireland within the Turing Scheme.⁵⁰

The Welsh and Scottish governments aimed to establish national schemes that enabled inward and outward student mobility and funded staff exchanges. For the Welsh government, this resulted in the launch of the Taith Programme in 2022.⁵¹ The Scottish Government announced in its 2021/22 programme that it would develop a Scottish Education Exchange Programme (the Test and Learn project).⁵² Given the strong cultural ties between Ireland and Scotland and between Ireland and Wales, both programmes have the potential to provide co-operation on short-term student and staff mobility.

The Taith Programme offers one of the most manageable first steps in reintroducing mobility flows between Ireland and Wales. Taith is Wales’s international exchange programme, which covers schools, youth, adult education, further and vocational education and training, and higher education. The programme covers inbound and outbound mobility, thus offering the scope to combine funding for reciprocal exchange between the two nations.

Interviewees suggested that there are already strong cultural ties between Wales and Ireland, but education relations were perceived to be comparatively less developed. While Taith’s current funding is until 2027, there is still a reasonable window to encourage greater mobility, particularly in the context of its renewal.⁵³

The Scottish Education Exchange Programme, Test and Learn, collaborates with Scotland’s colleges and universities. It is a small-scale project fund to support Scottish institutions in developing stronger international partnerships between educational institutions. It was initiated in 2021/22 and rolled out for the 2024/25 academic cycle. Scottish colleges and universities are invited to apply for a minimum of £1,000 and a maximum of £25,000, with additional funding of up to £10,000 for projects that include partnerships with other Scottish Government-recognised education providers. Learnings from the Test and Learn project will help develop the Scottish Education Exchange Programme moving forward.

Ireland’s Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science agreed in 2023 to provide €2 million annually to higher education institutions in Northern Ireland to maintain students’ access to mobility across Europe.⁵⁴

A number of interviewees noted the valuable relationships, connections and research interests which exist between and across the UK devolved nations and Ireland (at national, institutional and individual levels). A further opportunity for mobility in this context could be the development of focussed Summer Schools, for example Welsh Irish, Scottish Irish or English Irish, which could potentially be financially supported through existing joint government programmes such as The Shared Island Programme and facilitated by existing structures such as the Celtic Academies Alliance.⁵⁵

50 Gov.UK: Overview of the Turing Scheme, 2024 to 2025

51 Taith Wales

52 Scottish Education Exchange Programme: Test and Learn project

53 Global Wales and Taith Wales

54 Gov.ie: Minister Harris announces mobility funding for Northern Ireland higher education students

55 Royal Irish Academy - Celtic Academies Alliance

Estimates from UUKI place Northern Ireland as the UK nation with the highest proportion of study-abroad students. According to the UUKI’s *Facts and Figures 2019* report, the participation in international mobility of the 2016/17 graduating cohort across the devolved nations was the following⁵⁶:

- 13.2 per cent of undergraduate students from Northern Ireland had mobility experiences.
- 11.6 per cent of undergraduate students from Scotland had mobility experiences.
- 9.7 per cent of undergraduate students from Wales had mobility experiences.
- 7.2 per cent of undergraduate students from England had mobility experiences.

A significant proportion of the outbound mobility in Northern Ireland was to Ireland. While funding from the Irish Government covers Europe-wide mobilities, there is a strong north-south flow. Developing Ireland-specific mobility schemes across the devolved nations offers a low-cost study abroad opportunity in a familiar setting, and with environmentally sustainable means of transport.

The British Council plays a valuable role in promoting opportunities for, and insight into; student mobility through information dissemination at the Irish Times Higher Options Student Recruitment Fair; research and insight webinars; and amplification of initiatives from the Scottish and Welsh governments.⁵⁷ A high-impact area would be to focus on new initiatives that provide specific bilateral exchange and/or mobility programmes for Ireland and the UK students. Such an exchange would feel more like ‘home from home’ than less familiar and further afield destinations, and support building trust and understanding across the bilateral relationship.

56 International Facts and Figures
57 British Council at the Irish Times Higher Options event

Recognising the need to understand the ‘*aspirations and views of young people*’, the March 2025 UK-Ireland Summit committed to the establishment of an annual Ireland-UK Youth Forum. Given the British Council’s expertise in partnership and exchange, this is a potential area of collaboration for the Council.⁵⁸

3.2.3 Collaborative doctoral training

Financially, PhD students are different from undergraduate or master’s students in that all PhDs cost universities money, which must be found either through external funding sources or internal institutional budgets.

The primary funding source for PhD students in Ireland is Research Ireland.⁵⁹ Most scholarships are attached to specific research projects, so funding is by thematic areas. Given that most of the domestic PhD demand is flat, any growth in the system is likely to come from overseas or through privately funded doctoral researchers.

Irish universities are already embedded in the European University Alliance,⁶⁰ and the training of PhDs is one dimension within it. While this initiative is bringing EU higher education institutions and their academic and student communities closer, the UK is mainly outside the scheme.

Interviewees pointed out that ‘research grows organically’ and suggested there is a scope for shared doctoral programmes. For double and joint PhDs to grow, there would need to be jointly funded initiatives agreed between Research Ireland and UKRI.⁶¹ The UK’s association with Horizon Europe is expected to encourage and strengthen links and researcher mobility.

58 UK-Ireland 2030 Joint Statement - March 6 2025
59 Research Ireland
60 European University Alliance
61 UK Research and Innovation

One significant advantage of collaborative doctoral training is associated with limited capacity in niche research areas in Ireland. Collaborative training of doctoral researchers builds on the strengths of the Irish and UK research systems.

All PhD interviews in the study welcomed and expressed strong support for the idea of collaborative doctoral training. This is likely to be built on existing relationships, and the fact that half of the external examiners at some Irish universities are from the UK provides a good base.

Additionally, several interviewees spoke of how undertaking a PhD can be an isolating experience and suggested that the establishment of small networking grants to facilitate further collaboration would be valuable. The RIA’s Charlemont Grant was cited as a good example. The grant provides funding ‘*for a clearly defined piece of research ... undertaken through a short international visit... to initiate one-to-one collaborations, and/or explore opportunities to build lasting research collaborative networks and/or to gain access to ideas, library resources, research facilities including the use of equipment and/or receive research training not available in Ireland.*’⁶²

The Scottish Graduate School of Social Science⁶³ was offered as a strong example of a nationwide initiative that houses all doctoral researchers across Scottish higher education institutions. Also British Council Scotland’s collaboration with the Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities via the Earth Scholarships programme⁶⁴ provides support for international research collaborations between PhD and early career researchers, Scottish higher education institutes, Scotland-based academic mentors, and external organisations.

The prospect of the graduate school extending to Irish higher education institutions was perceived as highly attractive. The Welsh Graduate School for the Social Sciences⁶⁵ is an equivalent scheme in Wales.

Another opportune avenue is collaborative PhD training offered by Irish and UK higher education institutions in third countries. Analysis of the sources of funding for doctoral students shows a significant reduction in government scholarships and national agencies’ funding for PhD students to train abroad.⁶⁶ However, there has been growth in the budget allocated to split-site and joint PhDs, which typically occur under transnational education (TNE) arrangements.⁶⁷

62 Royal Irish Academy - Charlemont Grants
63 Scottish Graduate School of Social Science
64 Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities (Earth Scholarships)
65 Welsh Graduate Schools for the Social Sciences
66 Universities UK: Global demand for UK postgraduate research degrees
67 For an example of such initiative, see British Council Philippines Joint Programmes

3.2.4 Alumni engagement

Alumni engagement is an area that has long been used by governments to strengthen bilateral cooperation and by universities to develop partnerships and research collaboration. Much work is already being done here by the British Council and higher education institutions, and interviewees suggested that it was important to continue to prioritise and build on this.

The UK's withdrawal from the EU may offer opportunities to extend engagement to a wider group. Our interviewees suggested that the UK's withdrawal has resulted in increased numbers of UK academics and research teams relocating to Ireland, with many more doctoral researchers now working in Irish higher education. While no official figures are available at this time to confirm these observations, this shift, if confirmed, could provide important potential to engage with UK postgraduates and early career researchers working in Ireland to strengthen the connections between the two countries to the benefit of both.

The British Council's Alumni UK platform offers routes for engagement for alumni from Ireland. Additional opportunities can be explored through the Chamber of Commerce for business engagement, mentoring and other engagement events in London and elsewhere.

3.2.5 Research cooperation

Research cooperation between the UK and Ireland is essential in providing opportunities for postgraduate mobility, particularly at PhD and postdoctoral research levels. As already noted, the UK's withdrawal from the EU and uncertainty surrounding its participation in Horizon Europe served to put a brake on cooperation. However, the recent developments at the government levels discussed above leave room for optimism. University interviewees generally share this: one noted that the UK-Ireland research relationship (especially in science), *'will be straightforward to rekindle – pushing at an open door'*. From the Irish perspective, one interviewee commented, *'The UK has major stature as a global science player, and Irish academics will be delighted to know that the UK is back in the game.'*

Senior academic stakeholders commented that the diversity of the UK research portfolio strengthens opportunities for collaboration. While Ireland's advanced research capabilities are a huge asset, the size of the higher education system means that certain niche areas have limited domestic capacity. Interviewees in both countries acknowledged that a significant advantage of research partnerships is that they often outlive the term of the research contract. The UK's return to the EU's research programmes, Horizon and Copernicus, is an opportunity to build on existing strong links.

As already noted, there is no accurate estimate of the number of UK academics who moved to Ireland following the UK's exit from the EU. Still, anecdotal evidence suggests it is significant and continues to grow. Interviewees clearly believed that these academics retained strong networks with UK counterparts, which could be reactivated. Additionally, as one senior academic pointed out, a considerable percentage of Irish academics have at least one degree from the UK, usually at postgraduate level. There are opportunities here for developing and strengthening informal networks and connections.

3.2.6 University partnerships

University-to-university teaching partnerships are a priority for UK universities. This is to mitigate the barriers to engagement caused by the UK's decision not to participate in Erasmus+. One consequence is that they are not eligible to join the European University Alliance, which increasingly drives the development of universities' partnerships across EU countries. Given that the European University Alliance initiative is funded primarily through the Erasmus+ programme, UK interviewees see this as a significant disadvantage. This is also a missed opportunity for EU higher education institutions to engage with UK counterparts with a wealth of experience and a long track record in forging bilateral and multilateral teaching and research partnerships.

While Irish institutions have less of a track record in transnational education than their UK counterparts, there are similarities between the strategies of some UK and Irish institutions. The development of TNE partnerships is an area of growth across European universities, and they are increasingly providing pathways for the mobility of international students into postgraduate and undergraduate courses. UK and Irish interviewees perceive TNE as a viable opportunity to develop partnerships in some highly opportune global student markets. Joint provision could bring a collective offer, sharing risks and investments. It could also offer high potential in derisking higher education engagement in countries attracting geopolitical concerns. China is a current case in point, remaining as it does the top transnational education destination for UK and Irish higher education programmes.

A robust communication of the UK's return to Horizon could be combined with celebrating and amplifying information on governments' commitment to research collaboration and partnership as well as existing Ireland-UK research projects – ultimately leading to generating further initiatives for researchers to connect and build networks.

UK and Irish universities could collaborate to engage many young people between the two countries and their European counterparts. A realistic possibility is a bilateral partnership between UK and Irish higher education institutions to collaboratively provide double and joint degrees across the EU. UK institutions have a strong record in this area, and partnerships with Irish institutions mean fewer regulatory restrictions will be imposed on the TNE activities of non-EU education establishments.

In addition to university-to-university partnerships, there could also be scope for industry-to-university partnerships across the bilateral relationship. Industry funding for vocational exchange programmes in areas of shared concern and interest, such as energy, emerging technologies, food security, and renewables, could be offered.

3.2.7 Higher education sector-level cooperation

There is ongoing collaboration through a Memorandum of Understanding (renewed in 2021) between the UK Quality Assurance Agency and Quality and Qualification Ireland (QQI). This aims to share information on teaching, learning and assessment.⁶⁸

However, a recurring theme, highlighted by almost all stakeholders, was the need for a greater and deeper understanding of the higher education systems in both countries, including the qualification framework mapping across the systems. While sector agencies provide information (for example, UK Quality Assurance’s *Qualifications can cross boundaries: A guide to comparing qualifications in the UK and Ireland*), student interviewees from both Ireland and the UK experienced some confusion about equivalencies at the institutional level. They also reported difficulties resulting from different admission requirements and a lack of clarity around funding, scholarships, grade translation, visa requirements, cost of living, and access to services such as doctors and health professionals.

One interviewee, for example, recounted his experience of admissions staff in different UK universities providing different (sometimes inaccurate) advice on whether students from Ireland had to pay home or international tuition fees. The lack of clarity also sometimes extended to senior levels. One senior manager reflected on high-level meetings between vice-chancellors and government officials where the meaning and practical implications of the CTA were discussed. It became clear that there was still some uncertainty among those attending, particularly in highlighting the difference between what a student from Ireland pays at an Irish university and what they would pay at a Scottish, English or Welsh university. The interviewee also noted that access to healthcare was one of the main worries for UK staff and students going to Ireland. Interviewees saw disseminating accurate information as key to building and strengthening the UK-Ireland higher education relationship.

68 QAA renews memorandum of understanding with QQI Ireland

Thinking more broadly about agency and sector-level cooperation, one interviewee highlighted a currently missed opportunity relating to the international student experience. In 2012, a system-level collaboration between the UK, Ireland, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA produced the Statement of Principles for the Ethical Recruitment of International Students by Education Agents and Consultants (known as the London Statement). Education in Ireland was a prominent player in this initiative, and the London Statement continues to shape the six countries’ approach to international student recruitment (and is increasingly being adopted by other countries globally).⁶⁹

QQI launched TrustEd Ireland in September 2024. TrustEd is a statutory quality mark and one of several legislative measures designed to protect international learners in Ireland. TrustEd will be awarded to higher education, English language and professional education or training providers who ‘have demonstrated that they meet national standards to ensure a quality experience for international learners from pre-enrolment through to the completion of their programme of education and training.’⁷⁰ The TrustEd application process has commenced with significant levels of due diligence required in advance of the quality mark being awarded, including listing of education agents. Going forward, students applying to study in Ireland will not secure a visa unless their education provider has been awarded TrustEd status.

QQI has also published codes of practice for HE and English language providers.⁷¹ The HE Code aims to ensure that ‘the education agent, recruitment partner or consultant is operating within the spirit of the HE Code and the London Statement’.⁷²

69 The London Statement (2012)

70 TrustEd Ireland

71 QQI Policy - Code of Practice for Provision of Programmes of Higher Education to International Learners (2024)

72 QQI Policy - Code of Practice for Provision of Programmes of Higher Education to International Learners (2024), pages 15 and 16

While UK and Irish universities ‘collaboratively compete’ (as one interviewee put it) in many of the same markets, they share a significant common interest in ensuring ethical and sustainable international recruitment at postgraduate and undergraduate levels of study.

Continuing work in this area in the UK has recently resulted in the Agent Quality Framework, an initiative led jointly by the British Council, the British Universities’ International Liaison Association, the UK Council for International Student Affairs and UUKI.⁷³ The framework is designed to strengthen partnerships between the education sector, education agents and counsellors.

Given that higher education institutions in Ireland and the UK use the same education agents and recruitment companies, there is considerable scope for greater sector-level cooperation across both nations to strengthen the quality code and signal a joint commitment to ethical recruitment for undergraduate and postgraduate students. The British Council and relevant sector bodies in each location could explore points of alignment and how to drive these initiatives forward.

73 BUILA and UUKI announce the launch of the Agent Quality Framework pledge



4. Recommendations

4. Recommendations

In this section, our primary focus is on how the British Council, and other key stakeholders in the UK Ireland higher education bilateral relationship, might contribute to facilitating and supporting strengthened engagement, particularly with a view to encourage postgraduate mobility and research collaboration.

Timing and resources (both government and British Council) will be critical in prioritising here. Some interventions that play to the British Council's strengths are immediately possible with limited resources and would provide valuable foundations for future work. Others are largely dependent on a favourable political or economic context and, as such, are likely to be a longer-term prospect.

However, the March 2025 UK-Ireland Joint Statement by the Irish Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister and the forthcoming HEA Framework for Action for Higher Education in Ireland present timely opportunities for the British Council to offer partnership and support around some of the proposed initiatives.⁷⁴

Interviewees see the British Council's strengths as a strategic partner and convenor. As one interviewee reflected: *'the British Council is able to convene the right people in the room to get action agreed. It's also a valuable partner in that action.'* Research partnerships are areas where the British Council could play to those strengths to support a longer-term strategy.

• Information dissemination

Greater information on each country's higher education application process is needed to improve students' knowledge of Ireland and the UK's undergraduate and postgraduate application system.

Initiatives that do exist, such as the British Council's *UK Ireland Higher Education Information Guide*, could be extended to include postgraduate specific information. New initiatives could also be developed that support well-publicised and accessible information, such as developing digital portals or step-by-step guides to the university application process in each other's jurisdiction. This information could be accompanied by other 'wrap-around' advice relating to specifics, such as personal statements, conditional letters of offer (as in the UK system) or change of mind, programme prioritisation and selection (as in the Irish system), and could include important new updates such as the altered entry requirements to Irish universities for students who have taken A-levels and other specifics relating to postgraduate applications.

• Short-term student mobility and exchanges

Under the umbrella of the CTA, initiatives that address bilateral challenges could be explored, including the impact of former Erasmus+ opportunities for students from Ireland wishing to study in the UK – and maximise opportunities for students in moving across the islands.

Connection, collaboration, building trust and understanding, and most of all the opportunity to support young people in realising their potential, are at the heart of this recommendation. It responds to the sentiment within the UK-Ireland Joint Statement which states that *'to reach the potential of our partnership across these islands, we need to understand and respond to the aspirations and views of young people.'*⁷⁵

Inspiration can be taken from existing mobility bilateral initiatives. The UK Turing Scheme, the Welsh Government's Taith Programme and the Scottish Government's Test and Learn Project could serve as initial pilots for mobility initiatives – including country-level summer schools – that would work across and between the totality of the islands and maximise available opportunities for young people to connect, grow and learn together whilst activating the unique context of the CTA and the close geographic proximity of these islands.

The forthcoming HEA Framework for Action within Higher Education, which facilitates mobility and collaborations with Northern Ireland, Great Britain, and Europe, may provide a timely vehicle for pursuing such mobility and exchange initiatives.

• Collaborative doctoral training

Higher education professionals and doctoral researchers highlighted the 'organic nature' of research growth and saw vast potential in shared doctoral programmes. Expanding double and joint PhDs would necessitate collaborative funding initiatives between UKRI and Research Ireland. Additionally, the UK's continued participation in Horizon Europe is anticipated to foster further research connections and mobility between the UK and Ireland.

Collaborative doctoral training between the UK and Ireland offers a valuable solution to Ireland's limited capacity in niche research areas and helps to build networks organically. This approach leverages the combined strengths of the Irish and UK research systems. The concept enjoys enthusiastic support from all doctoral and early career interviewees, with existing UK-Irish research relationships providing a solid foundation. Notably, the significant presence of UK academics serving as external examiners at Irish universities underscores these strong ties.

⁷⁴ Global Citizens 2030, Ireland's International Talent and Innovation Strategy: Enhancing Ireland's global influence through excellence and inclusion in talent and innovation (2024)

⁷⁵ UK-Ireland 2030 Joint Statement - March 6 2025

The Scottish Graduate School of Social Science, a national initiative encompassing all doctoral researchers across Scottish higher education institutions, is a compelling model. Expanding such a model to include Irish institutions holds significant appeal. The Welsh Graduate School for the Social Sciences offers a similar framework for Wales.

Another opportune area of mutual interest is the development of joint doctoral training for PhD students in the UK and Ireland.

• Alumni engagement

Maintaining engagement with alumni is an important area, in which British Council Ireland is already engaged.⁷⁶ Ireland is now one of the most significant EU sources of inbound students to the UK for undergraduate and postgraduate study.

If the current strong enrolment rates of students are maintained, the alumni network has the potential to grow and expand at the same rate, if properly managed and maintained. Specifically at the postgraduate level, our research suggests that many doctoral researchers already work in Irish higher education. Engaging with this group offers significant potential to build networks of champions that will be critical for future bilateral relations. This is an area where the British Council, through its Alumni UK platform and its connections with employers, can play a significant role in promoting and supporting bilateral engagement that will substantially benefit both countries.

Additional opportunities for business engagement, mentoring, and other engagement events in London and elsewhere can be explored through the Chamber of Commerce.

The Alumni network can be fully utilised through broader dissemination and promotion of information in the *UK Ireland Higher Education Information Guide*.

• Research cooperation

Research partnerships are an area of strength, and robust bilateral research programmes and discipline-specific links exist. In the context of limited funds, government funding will likely focus on areas of mutual and strategic interest to both countries. It could also be useful to work alongside the priorities of the devolved desks and ensure engagements with Welsh and Scottish Government desks in Ireland.

Overall, ensuring a strong regional dimension across the islands would be ideal. The two new Ireland-UK research centres on climate change and sustainable food, jointly funded by the UK and Irish governments, are notable recent examples.⁷⁷

The British Council, working alongside government and agency partners, could play an essential role over the mid-term, communicating the UK's renewed participation in Horizon and supporting networks of researchers and groups working in the mutual interest of both countries. In strengthening east-west community engagement through highly relevant research, such as peace and reconciliation research, environmental sustainability, biodiversity, and sustainable food systems, the British Council will also link to Ireland's Global Talent Strategy and the Framework for Action developed by the HEA.

One of the challenges several interviewees identified is the imbalance in interest between the UK and Ireland. While the Irish focus in this context has mainly been on building the relationship between Ireland and Northern Ireland, the UK focuses on research partnerships beyond this and into Europe. This area may be where the location in the EU Region of the British Council's distinct network, British Council Ireland, could make a valuable contribution.

The British Council therefore has an important potential role in working alongside bodies such as Research Ireland and UUKI to support inward delegations, communicate and facilitate research connections across the islands, and build bilateral networks.

• University partnerships

While university partnership in transnational education is a much longer-standing priority for UK universities than for their Irish counterparts, it is, nevertheless, an area of strength for both countries. As noted in 'The Role of Transnational Education Partnerships in Building Sustainable and Resilient Higher Education', 'TNE is an area of international higher education where the UK has a global lead with over half a million students enrolled on degree programmes overseas'.⁷⁸

This is relevant because, for many students, this type of collaborative teaching provision is the beginning of their journey to postgraduate training. Building on these strengths, UK and Irish higher education institutions could continue to grow TNE partnerships (including online delivery) between Ireland and the UK and develop collaborative TNE programmes in third countries. Collaborative TNE programmes between UK and Irish higher education institutions could be part of a strategic shift towards de-risking engagement in high-risk countries.

With the escalation of geopolitical tensions resulting in much higher scrutiny of research and teaching partnerships by the UK and Irish governments, collaborative TNE could form part of a risk mitigation strategy. Beyond political risk mitigation, an additional opportunity could include collaborative delivery by UK and Irish higher education institutions in third countries of mutual interest.

Over the last decade, the British Council has developed significant expertise (and an excellent track record) in promoting and supporting TNE partnerships globally. This is an area where the British Council, through its global network, could make a valuable long-term contribution.

• System level

At the system level, there is a significant communication gap regarding higher education providers in each country understanding the other's systems. The British Council has an immediate and potentially high-impact role here. Following the UK's exit from the EU, there is still significant confusion about the current state of play, which, in turn, is leading to general frustration across both higher education sectors.

The complexity of higher education institutions' internal structures and job roles makes communication a substantial practical challenge. The British Council has demonstrated excellence in the development of the *Higher Education Information Guide: UK-Ireland*.⁷⁹

There is a need to continue to provide proactive communication, updating and disseminating accurate information to the 'right' people in government departments, agencies and higher education institutions. One practical suggestion made by interviewees was that the British Council should continue to update the guide and extend this to information for postgraduate students and early career researchers. This would be hugely valuable to vice-chancellors, admissions teams, faculty and students.

⁷⁶ British Council Ireland - UK Ireland Alumni Reception

⁷⁷ Gov.UK - £60 million joint funding announced for two new research centres on climate and sustainable food

⁷⁸ IHEC: The Role of TNE in Building Sustainable and Resilient Higher Education (2023), page 3.

⁷⁹ British Council - Higher Education Mobility UK and Ireland

Keeping the guide up to date, with, for example, the new admission tariffs and major application deadlines in both countries, will significantly impact students' decision-making on study options. This could be made more widely accessible through the web resources that prospective students consult, such as the Study UK student database⁸⁰ and Education in Ireland⁸¹

At the system level – especially in the context of the positive 2030 announcements within the March 2025 UK-Ireland Joint Statement – there is an opportunity for the British Council to convene the appropriate government departments and sector agencies in both countries to collaborate on system-level interventions in the space of ethical international student recruitment, thus signalling a joint commitment to ethical recruitment for undergraduate and postgraduate students.

As noted, Ireland and the UK have joined forces in this area before. Together, they were prime movers in producing – and key signatories to – the London Statement in 2012. While they compete in international student recruitment, they have a critical shared need to ensure that recruitment is ethical and sustainable. The British Council could proactively seek to engage QQI and Irish higher education institutions in working with the British Council and UK agencies to explore alignment points between TrustEd Ireland and the Agent Quality Framework.

Collaboration could be an initial mechanism to strengthen agency and higher education institutions' relationships and potentially work towards exploring joint programme development and transnational partnerships in the future.

Early career researchers and HE professionals reiterated that a significant obstacle to full HE cooperation is the treatment of international students in Ireland and Northern Ireland, who are heavily disadvantaged regarding access to HE opportunities such as conferences, doctoral training and events across the Island

of Ireland. Niche STEM areas across universities in Ireland and Northern Ireland have a high proportion of non-EU students, especially at the postgraduate level of study. While there is no physical border on the island of Ireland, non-EU students and early career researchers require the respective visas to attend events and conferences in Northern Ireland or Ireland. There have been repeated calls for students and researchers to be exempt from UK and EU visas for participation in professional events, doctoral training workshops and conferences.

In conclusion

This study highlights challenges in knowledge, information, funding mechanisms, and resources that drive bilateral commitments forward. However, it also captures highly positive sentiments from government to individual early career research levels. It demonstrates a strong willingness to explore enhanced opportunities for engagement and collaboration between the UK and Ireland in higher education.

Core to this is the commitment across the islands – emphasised within the Joint Statement of the leaders of both countries – to maximise available opportunities for students to connect, grow, and learn together while activating the unique context of the Common Travel Area and the close geographic proximity of these islands.

The British Council has essential roles in communicating and disseminating accurate information; convening and facilitating engagement between agencies; higher education institutions and students; and amplifying, promoting and celebrating the achievements of the UK-Ireland higher education relationship.

Notes

[illegible]

80 Study UK

81 Education in Ireland

Notes

[illegible]

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