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# Higher Education Postgraduate Mobility: UK-Ireland

28<sup>th</sup> May 2025

[www.britishcouncil.org/research-insight](http://www.britishcouncil.org/research-insight)

# Webinar May 28<sup>th</sup> 2025

1. Country Director, Dr Kerry McCall Magan
2. EU Regional Director for Education, British Council, Erika Boak
3. Researchers, Janet Ilieva of Education Insight (UK) and Gill Roe of Southern Cross Consulting (IRL)



# Context

1. **British Council Ireland work in Education incl previous Higher Education research on UK Ireland mobility flows**
2. **Horizon Europe reassociation (January 2024)**
3. **UK-Ireland 2030 Joint Statement**



## Universities UK International (UUKI) Delegation Visit

We are partnering with Universities UK International (UUKI) to support an inward delegation of representatives from UK universities to Ireland in March 2025.



## UK Ireland Alumni Reception

British Council Ireland and the British Embassy in Dublin hosted an inaugural UK Ireland Alumni Reception in 2024 and will host a second in March 2025.



## International Education Programme: Wales Study Visit 2025

We partnered with the British Council International Education Programme Unit on a study visit to Ireland for Welsh school teachers and local authority stakeholders from 10-14 February 2025.



## Higher Options 2024

We took part in the Irish Times Higher Options for the second year to disseminate information and promote the UK as a study destination to Irish students.



## Higher Education Information Guide: UK Ireland

Prepared by British Council Ireland with the support of the British Embassy in Dublin



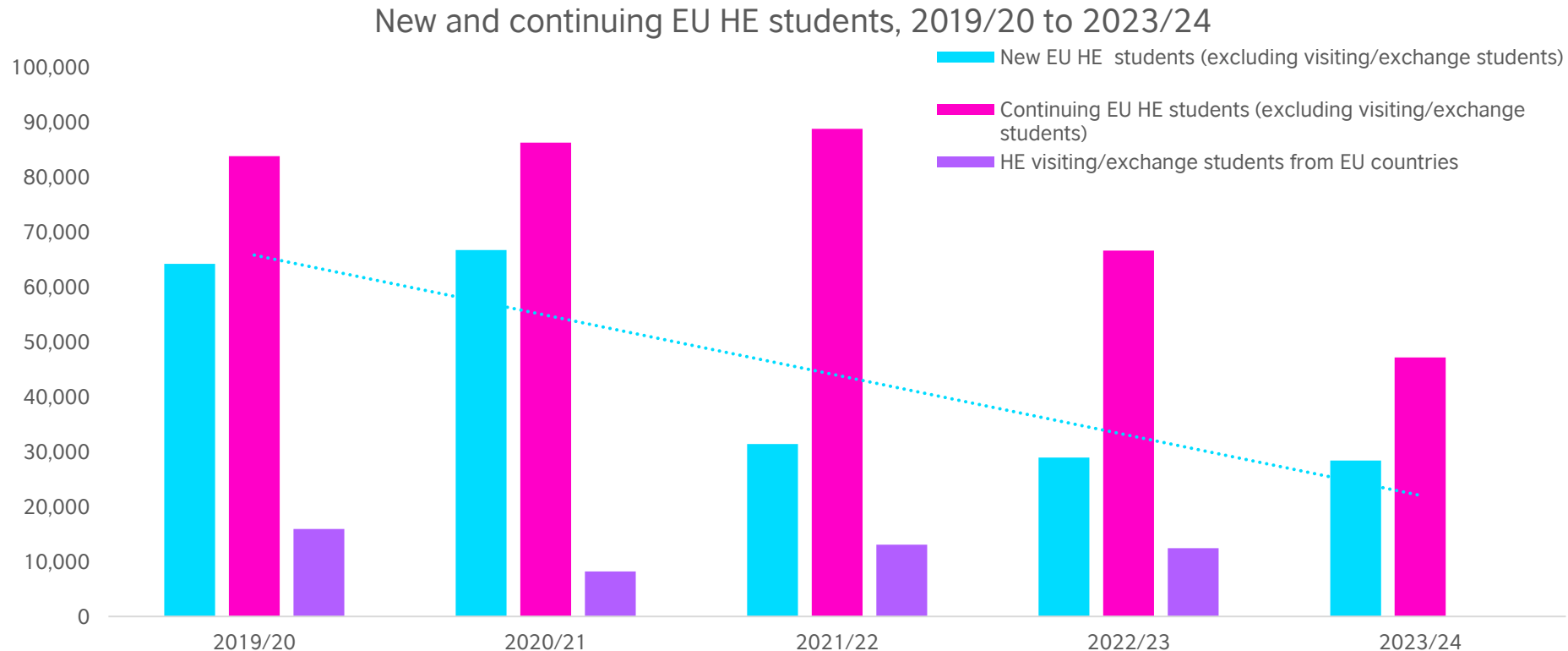
# The context of EU-UK Student Mobility

Erika Boak, EU Regional Director for Education, British Council

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## New EU students fell sharply in 2021 but have since remained fairly stable, while visiting / exchange students are also well below pre-Covid levels

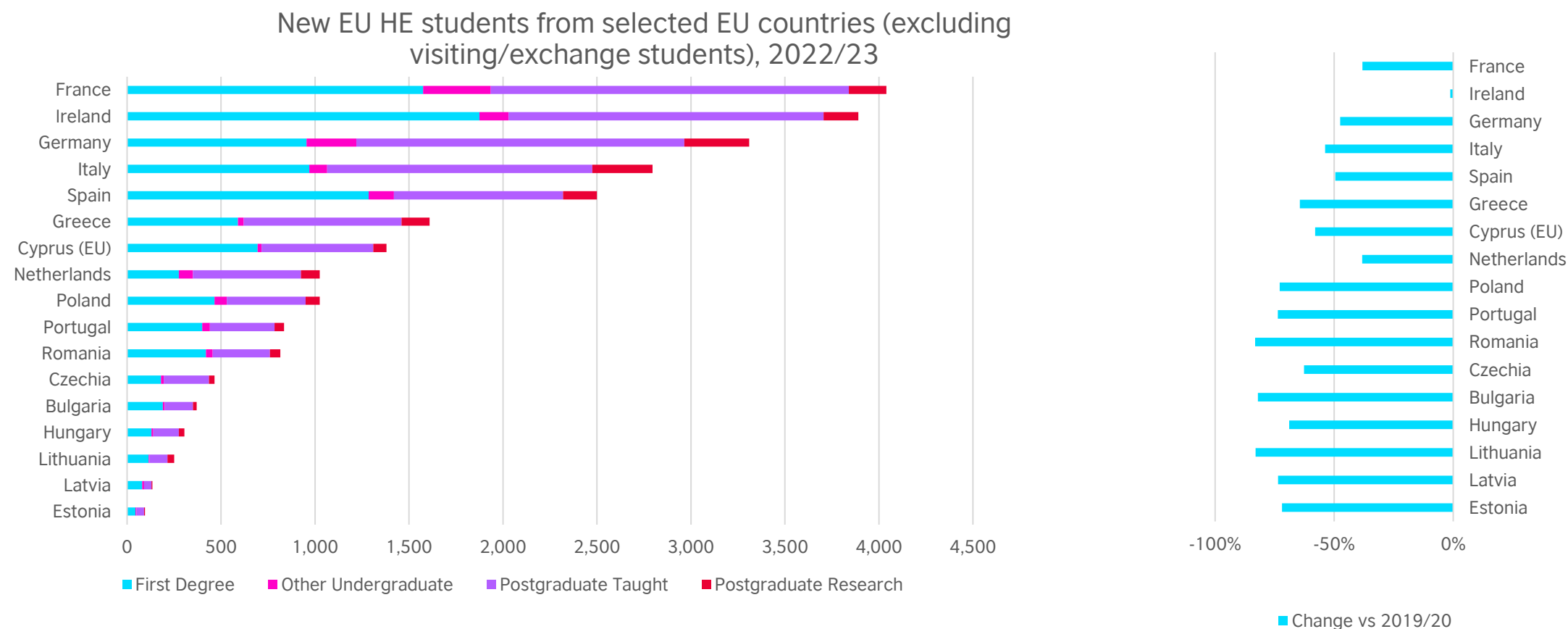
- The 2021 drop is directly connected to changes to EU students' fee levels and loan eligibility
- New EU students fell by 2% in 2023/24 and 9% in 2022/23, but these were much smaller than the 53% drop in 2021/22.
- Total EU students continue to fall as pre-Brexit entrants finish their courses



Source: HESA  
(Data on visiting/exchange students  
in 2023/24 is not yet available)

With the exception of Ireland, all EU countries have seen significant drops in student numbers compared to pre-Brexit

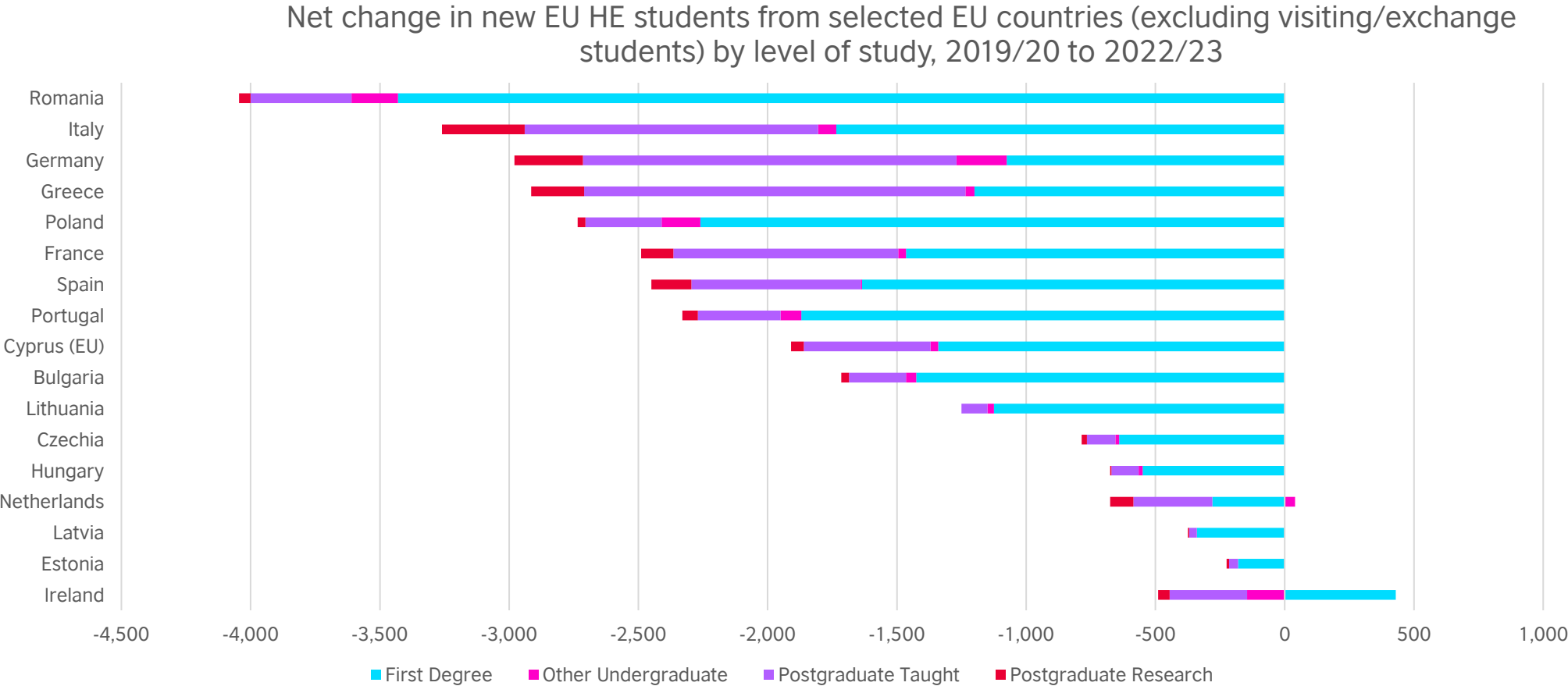
- Eastern Europe, Greece and Portugal have seen the largest drops, while student numbers from Ireland were basically flat



Source: HESA

# Romania and Italy have accounted for the largest overall net declines compared to 2019/20

- As noted on the previous slide, Eastern European countries have generally seen bigger declines in percentage terms



Source: HESA



# Higher Education Postgraduate Mobility: UK-Ireland

Researchers: Janet Ilieva, Education Insight and Gill Roe,  
Southern Cross Consulting



# Outline

1. Research objectives
2. UK-Ireland higher education relationship:  
Shifting landscapes
3. Challenges and opportunities for UK-Ireland  
engagement: some emerging themes



# Research objectives

1. This research follows on from a 2023 study, Higher Education Mobility: UK-Ireland, which focused on undergraduate student mobility
2. The study explores postgraduate student flows between the UK and Ireland, focusing on PhD students and early career researchers
3. The primary aims were:
  - *To identify initiatives to create educational opportunities for postgraduate researchers to build and maintain enduring relationships across the islands, and*
  - *To highlight ways in which the British Council in Ireland can support identified opportunities to build, maintain and sustain connections and mobility in higher education*

# Methodology and data collection

1. The study drew on the latest data sets from the **UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)** and from **Ireland's Higher Education Authority (HEA)**
2. Key policy documents also informed the study, including:
  - *UK's International Education Strategy*
  - *Ireland's International Talent and Innovation Strategy, Global Citizens 2030*
  - *The Global Wales Programme, and*
  - *Scotland's International Education Strategy*
3. Complementing the analysis, qualitative semi-structured interviews focusing on current engagement at postgraduate level were conducted with several stakeholders including:
  - *The British Council, National Agencies in the UK and Ireland: UK Research and Innovation, Taith Wales, Research Ireland, Irish Universities Association, HEA, Enterprise Ireland, government departments and PhD students in both countries*



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# **UK-Ireland higher education relationship: Shifting landscapes**

# The context – HE environment

1. A high level of uncertainty is present within the current operating environment, for example:
  - *The UK Office for Students' recent report on the financial sustainability shows that 45% of the English Higher Education Institutions will report a deficit in 2024–25, possibly increasing to 72% by 2025–26*
  - *Data for the UK shows declines in international enrolments in 2023/24*
  - *While HEA data shows international student numbers in Ireland have increased significantly over the past five years, Irish Higher education funding remains low by international standards and is impacting HEI operations*
2. The recently published Immigration White Paper has added a layer of complexity to international student recruitment in the UK

# The context – connections

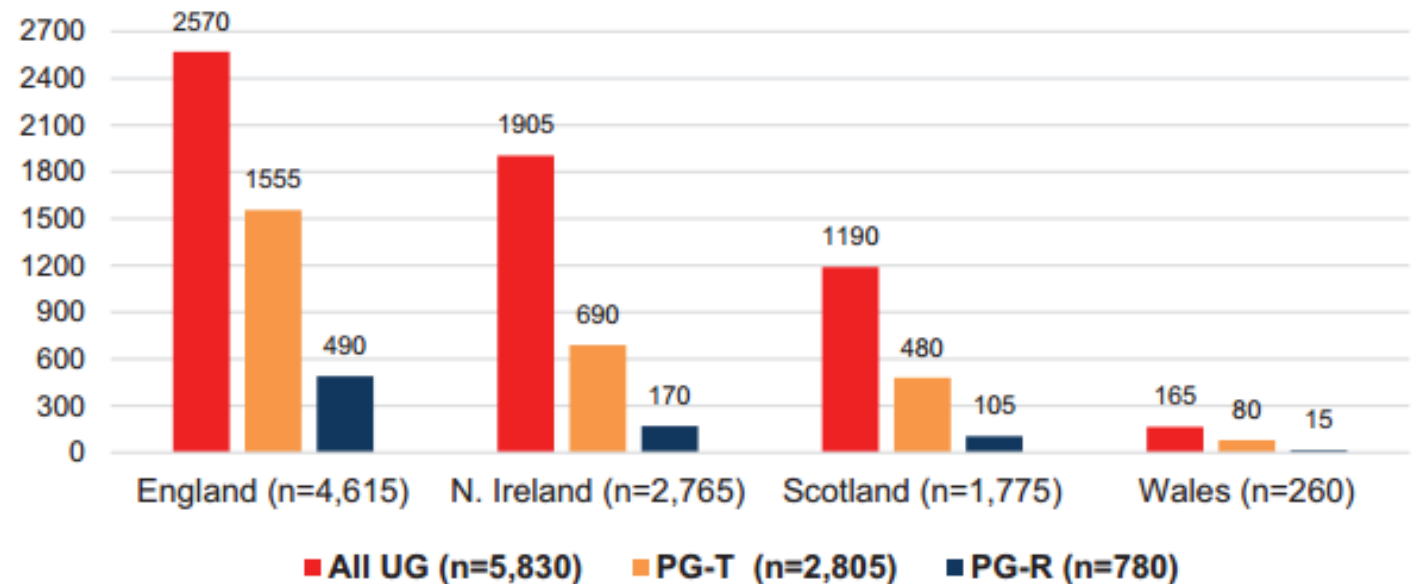
2. Positively supported by the **Common Travel Area Agreement**, connections and linkages across all levels of HE in Ireland and the UK are historically strong and are important enabling factors in growing collaboration
  - *Research collaboration is robust and is bolstered by the recent commitment by both governments to cooperate further in higher education and research (UK-Ireland 2030 Joint Statement, March 2025)*
  - *Almost 5,000 academics from Ireland work in UK HE*
  - *A high proportion of academics in Ireland have at least one UK HE qualification*
  - *A high percentage of external examiners to Irish HE are from UK*

# Research engagement

1. Strong research collaboration between the two countries has evolved over many years, some examples include:
  - *Joint funding of €70 million committed to create two new research centres on **climate and biodiversity** and **sustainable and resilient food systems** [November 2023]*
  - *Collaboration between Research Ireland and the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the UK (AHRC) in Digital Humanities was agreed in 2020. The programme funded 12 research networking grants and 11 major research grants, and the next stage of the programme is under consideration*
  - *The North-South Research Programme, part of Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy is funded through the Shared Island Initiative. Funding for the current call is €55 million*
  - *Research collaboration between Research Ireland and the UK Economic and Social Research Council supported 20 research projects, covering mental health, children's welfare, public health, and data protection*

# Student Mobility: students from Ireland in the UK

- This analysis includes undergraduate and postgraduate students. The former is a crucial component of the student's journey to PhD study and postdoctoral research
- There were almost 9,500 students from Ireland enrolled in UK higher education institutions in 2022/23. Of those, 80 per cent (7,520) are full-time students

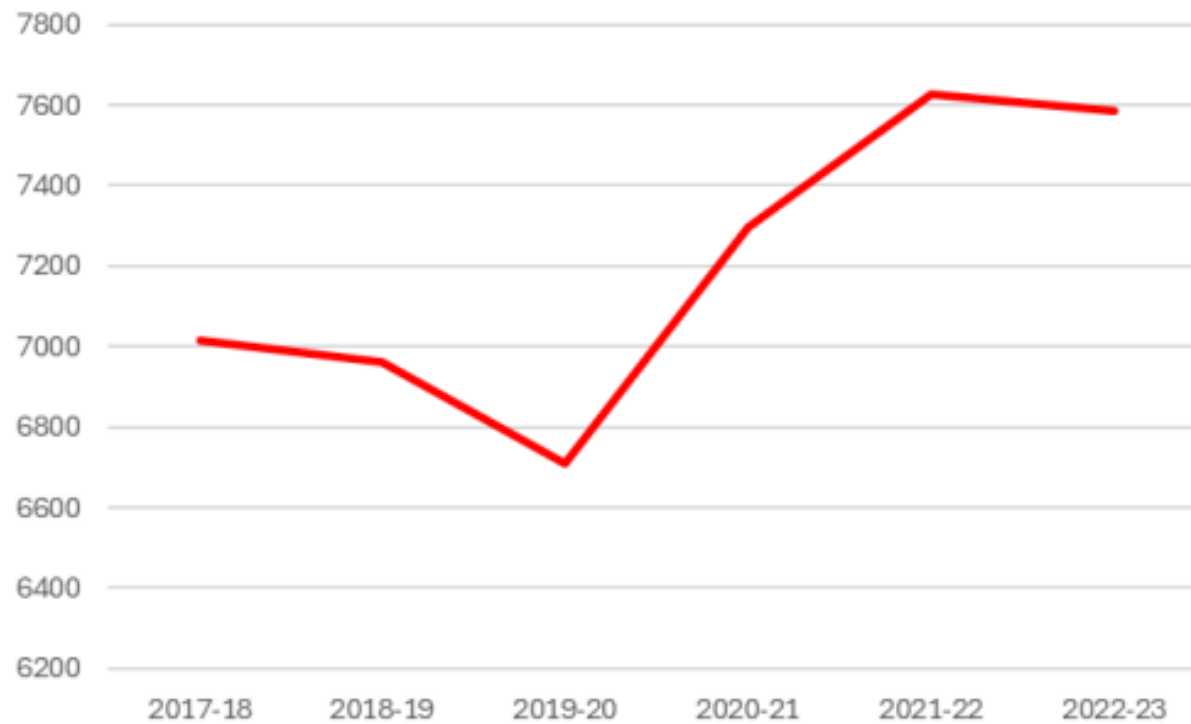




# Student Mobility: students from Ireland in the UK

- Following a dip in 2019/20, the number of full-time students rebounded in 2020/21 and 2021/22
- Enrolment numbers from Ireland declined by around 4 per cent between 2021/22 and 2022/23

Full-time students from Ireland enrolled in UK higher education, 2017/18 to 2022/23



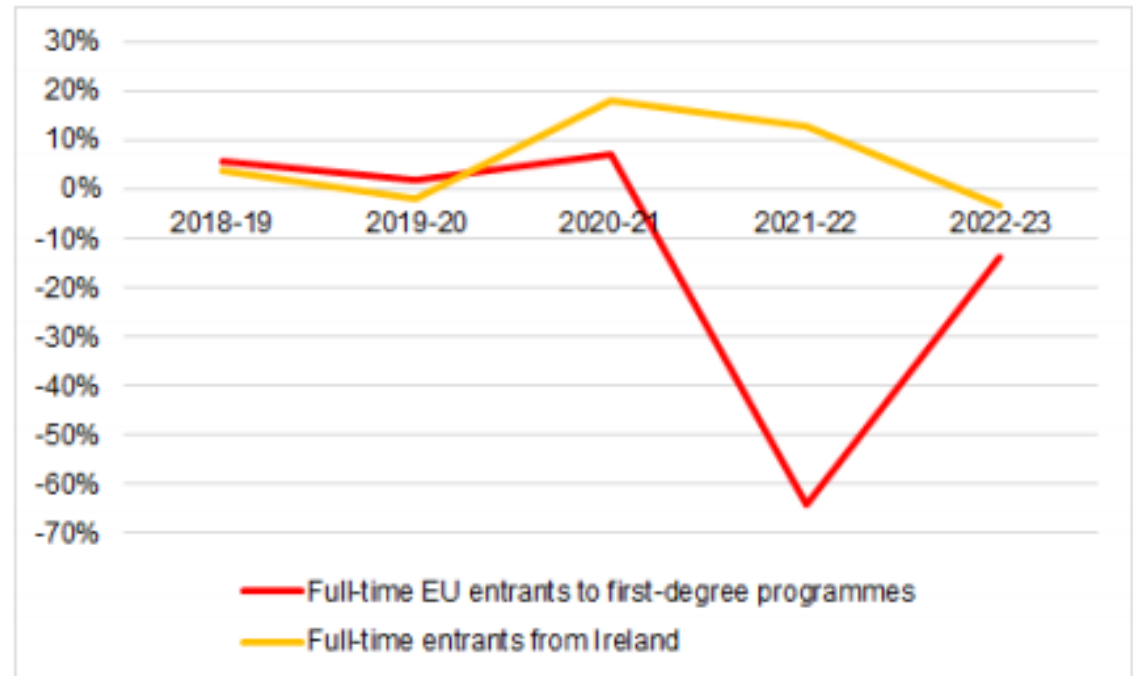
# UCAS application data shows that Ireland is the 4th largest source of applications in 2025

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%

# Student Mobility: students from Ireland in the UK

- EU full-time entrants dipped by 63 per cent (42,390 students) overall between 2020/21 and 2022/23
- Growth from Ireland slowed down in this period (by 7 per cent, 235 entrants), with strong signs of recovery at the undergraduate level of study
- Ireland is now the second most important EU source country for the UK, after France (overtaking countries with previously significantly higher numbers like Germany, Italy and Spain)

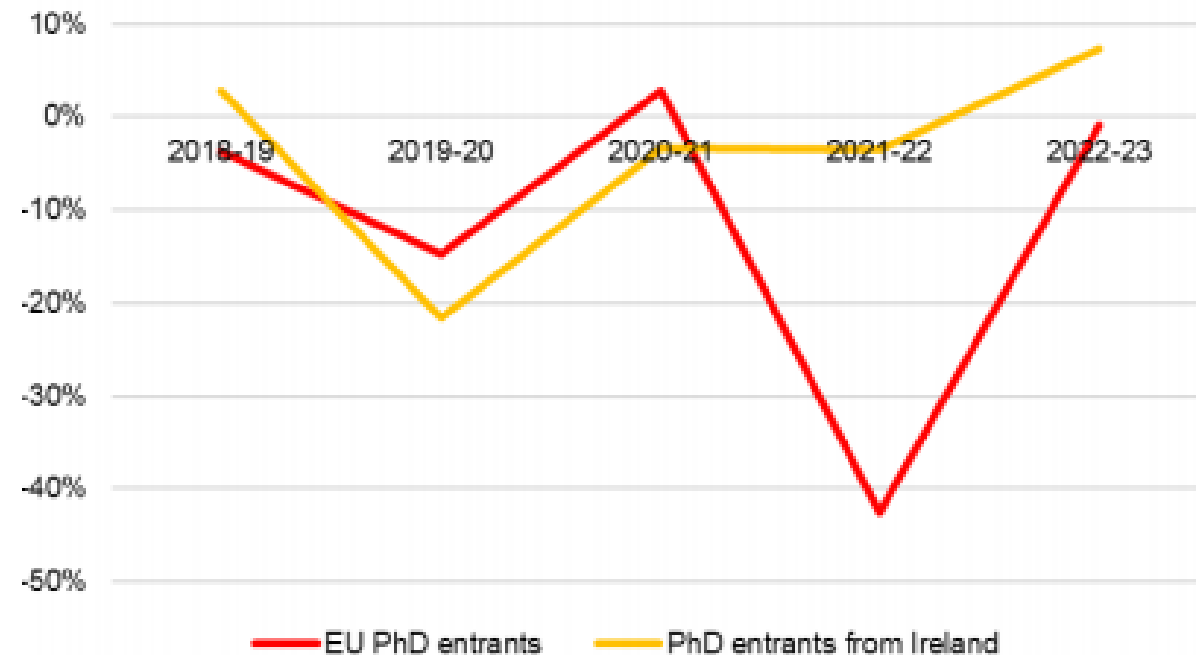
Full-time EU and Irish entrants to UK higher education



# Student Mobility: PhD students from Ireland in the UK

- A similar pattern emerges for PhD programmes
- Following a decline in 2019/20, the number of students from Ireland studying at the PhD level in the UK has again increased to 2018 levels, whereas PhD students from other EU countries have declined by over 40 per cent

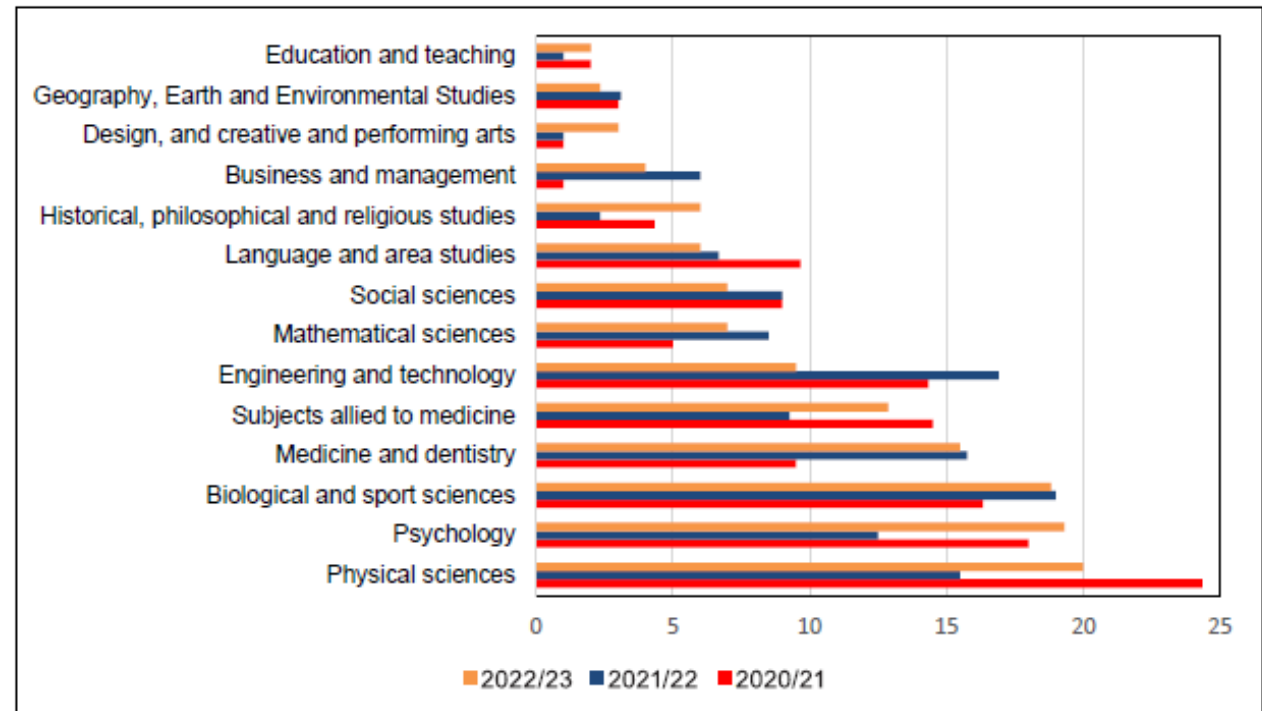
Full-time EU and Irish entrants to UK higher education



# Student Mobility: PhD students from Ireland in the UK

- PhD demand for students from Ireland is concentrated in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM subjects)
- 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 Irish full-time students in 2021/22

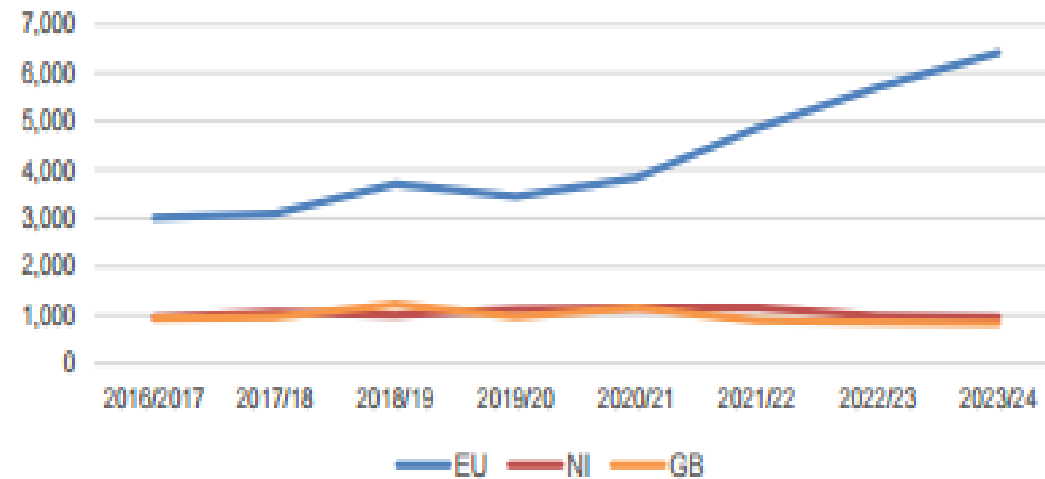
PhD subject choice for doctoral students from Ireland in the UK, 2020/21 to 2022/23



# Student Mobility: students from the UK in Ireland

- Undergraduate and Postgraduate full-time students
- Students from EU countries enrolling in full-time higher education in Ireland are growing at over 10 per cent per year
- UK students in Ireland – a different scenario...
- Enrolments from the UK are declining

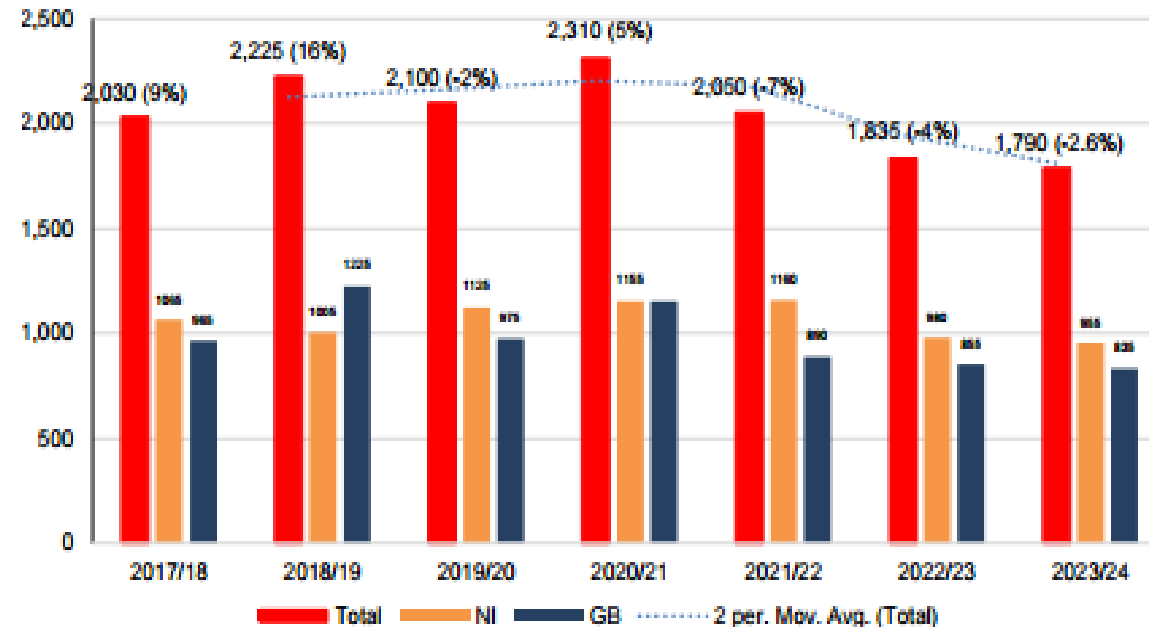
Full-time students from Great Britain (GB), Northern Ireland (NI) and the EU in Ireland, 2017/18 – to 2023/24 (HEA)



# Student Mobility: students from UK in Ireland

- Low numbers and uneven and declining enrolment patterns
- Enrolments dropped from 2,310 in 2020/21 to 1,790 in 2023/24
- Declines are evident across all levels of study, but particularly at undergraduate level and for students from Great Britain
- Enrolments from Northern Ireland were stable up to 2021/22 but have shown a decline over the last two years

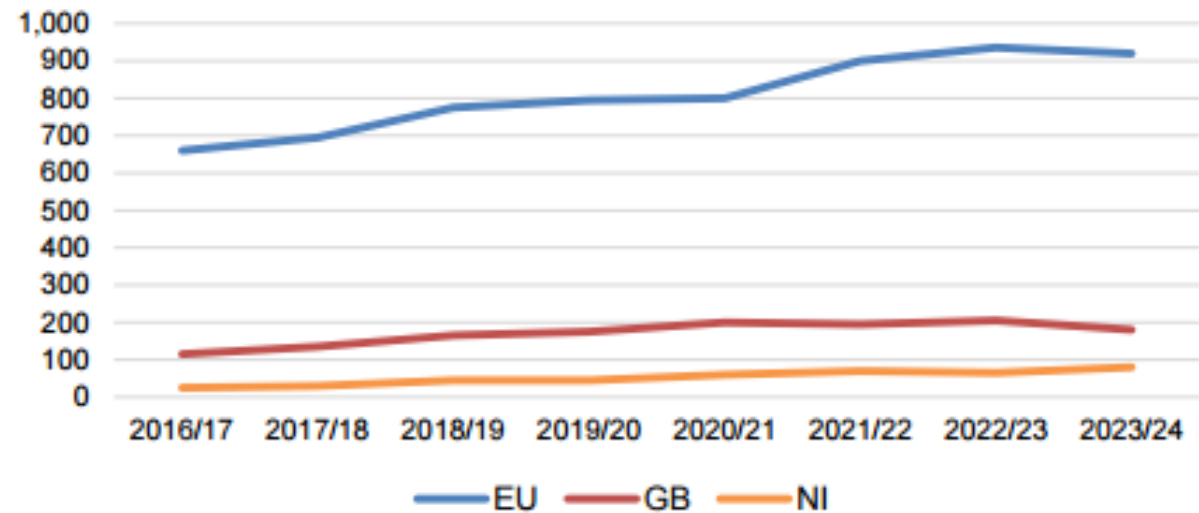
Full-time students from the UK in Ireland HE, 2017/18 – to 2023/4 (HEA)



# Student Mobility: EU v UK PhD demand for HE in Ireland

- Enrolments in PhD programmes demonstrate a similar pattern to other levels of study
- *EU numbers increasing up to 2022/23*
- *GB and NI numbers showing slight increases up to 2022/23, with a slight decline in GB enrolments and a slight increase in NI numbers over the last year*

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





# Student Mobility: UK PhD HE choices in Ireland

- *PhD students from the UK in Ireland are focused on STEM subjects, but there is a strong concentration on arts & 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
- Overall, students from Great Britain strongly favour Dublin-based higher education institutions



# Challenges and opportunities for UK-Ireland engagement

Emerging themes

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# System to system level challenges

1. Interviews reinforced the difficulty of disentangling Ireland's HE relationship with the UK from its relationship with the EU. The Ireland-UK relationship is seen as inherently linked to the EU-UK relationship, and it was recognised that this is a continually shifting environment
2. The UK's exit from the EU immediately impacted the UK-Ireland relationship in Erasmus+
  - The loss of the UK as a potential Erasmus+ destination has created a significant gap for students from Ireland
  - In July 2023, the Irish government announced support for Northern Ireland student mobility to ensure NI's continued participating in the Erasmus+
1. **New UK–EU mobility scheme announced last week** would allow young people in the UK and the EU to move and work freely between countries for a limited period of time.

# Sector and institutional-level challenges

1. A structural mismatch is Ireland's later UG place allocation, combined with rising pressures on accommodation and issues around the equivalence system, which many interviewees felt impacted postgraduate mobility
2. In May 2019, both governments signed a new memorandum on the CTA (reaffirmed in March 2025 Joint Statement). Despite continued communication from both governments, interviewees noted that some staff at UK universities were not aware of the CTA
3. Although Ireland is the UK's second-largest source of EU students, it is not a priority for UK universities due to domestic fee status. Similarly, UK students are not a priority for Irish institutions as they do not pay undergraduate fees and pay EU postgraduate fees
4. The reliance on international student fees in both countries leads institutions to prioritise resources for competitive global markets. Despite market size differences, Irish and UK universities compete in the same markets, pushing UK-Irish HE relations down the priority list for most universities

# Opportunities for HE engagement

- Regardless of challenges, stakeholders noted significant benefits in UK-Ireland higher education ties, especially in postgraduate and research fields
- This is strongly supported by the UK-Ireland 2030 Joint Statement, issued in March 2025 emphasising cooperation in education, training, mobility and research
- New opportunities for engagement arise through the implementation of the HEA's forthcoming Framework for Action with the Irish HE sector

A short, horizontal cyan line.

# Recommendations

# Recommendations

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**

# Recommendations

- **Information Dissemination** - Enhancing awareness of application processes in Ireland (CAO) and the UK (UCAS) is crucial. Existing resources, like the British Council's guide, should be expanded
  - *Additional guidance on personal statements, conditional offers, and programme selection would benefit prospective students, particularly in light of recent changes, such as new entry requirements for A-level students applying to Irish Universities*
- **Short-term Student Mobility and Exchanges** - Encouraging short-term mobility and exchanges within the CTA could address the impact of the UK's departure from Erasmus+
  - *Inspired by existing UK initiatives (Turing Scheme, Taith Programme (Wales), and Scottish Test and Learn Project), new pilot projects such as inter-island summer schools could facilitate greater connectivity among students*



# Recommendations

- **Collaborative Doctoral Training** - Collaborative PhD programmes between the UK and Ireland hold substantial promise, especially in niche research areas where Ireland has limited capacity
  - *Expanding joint or double PhD programmes would require shared funding arrangements from UKRI and Research Ireland*
  - *The UK's continued participation in Horizon Europe further strengthens opportunities for collaboration, building on existing strong academic ties. Models like the Scottish and Welsh Graduate Schools offer frameworks for future collaboration*
- **Alumni engagement** - Strengthening alumni engagement is critical for enhancing bilateral relations, particularly given Ireland's status as a significant source of students for UK universities
  - *British Council Ireland's existing alumni initiatives can be expanded, particularly by engaging doctoral alumni working in Irish higher education. Enhanced alumni networks could foster professional mentorship, career events, and deeper business linkages*

# Recommendations

- **Research Cooperation** - research partnerships remain robust and strategic, particularly in mutual interest areas such as climate change, sustainable food systems, and peace and reconciliation studies. Recent initiatives, including two new UK-Ireland research centres, demonstrate the strength of this cooperation
  - *The British Council can play a pivotal role by facilitating communication and network-building, particularly regarding the UK's renewed Horizon participation*
- **University Partnerships** - University partnerships in Transnational Education (TNE) represent significant opportunities for both the UK and Ireland, leveraging the UK's global leadership and Ireland's growing interest
  - *Collaborative TNE programmes could mitigate geopolitical risks and enhance teaching provision in third countries*

# Recommendations

- **System-level Engagement** – there remains a communication gap regarding mutual understanding of the UK and Irish higher education systems. Addressing this gap through proactive and accurate dissemination of information—such as continuously updated guides—is vital
  - *Promoting ethical international recruitment practices, aligning TrustEd Ireland and the UK’s Agent Quality Framework, and resolving visa issues affecting international students attending events across Ireland and Northern Ireland could substantially improve cooperation and the overall student experience*

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**Thank you for listening**

**Please let us know if you  
have any questions...**