

The UCCRSA's Position Paper on the Potential Impact of Brexit's on the Irish Higher Education Sector and Research Opportunities¹

Irish Higher Education (HE) and Austerity

The OECD has long advocated that Ireland needs to continuously invest in its higher education sector to maintain global competitiveness, knowledge generation and future innovation. However, since the economic crisis of 2008, the Irish Higher Education sector was severely hit with austerity measures. For instance, between 2008 and 2017, UCC's core budget was reduced from c. €90m to €30m. The net result is that UCC, and Irish Universities in general, have fallen behind on international league tables indicative of excellence within the global higher education context. A world class higher education system cannot be maintained without providing adequate investment into its resources, staff and research capacity. In fact, it is long proven that such investment pays dividends in terms of national economic growth and social development (adding between 2-4% GDP). In UCC's case, the funding shortfall has been addressed through:

- 1) applying for more competitive EU research grants;
- 2) increased numbers of industry partnerships, and
- 3) seeking additional funding by means of donations and philanthropic means.

However, such a move has the potential to compromise academic freedom, and posed ethical dilemmas vis-à-vis an over-reliance on industrial partnership collaborations. And now, with Brexit, it appears more important than ever that the Government of Ireland invests heavily in its Higher Education sector. Why?

Brexit, Higher Education (HE) and Ireland

When the UK leaves the EU, there will be a reduced amount of research funding opportunities for Ireland. For example, many UK based funding streams, such as the billion euro Wellcome Trust, may no longer be open to non-UK HE partners, which Irish HEIs have traditionally benefited from. Furthermore, while Ireland is currently very successful in acquiring EU Framework funding (Horizon 2020, formerly FP7), and is the third biggest EU beneficiary, in over 10% of successful applications, Ireland had the UK as a strong research partner.

We argue that it would neither be in Ireland's, or indeed, the EU's interest, to take a hard line towards Brexit in relation to Research. Innovation and development are inter-dependent on cross-country collaborations in order to draw on a wider base of expertise, knowledge and resources. Currently, the EU is leading the scientific sphere globally (HEA, 2016). But a difficult Brexit negotiation (*i.e.* with the exclusion of the UK as a collaborating HEI partner affecting the mobility of academic and research staff and students) could cause the deterioration of the EU as a world leader in science, technology, and the generation of knowledge. The main hurdle to overcome is the free movement (*i.e.* mobility) of researchers, academics and students despite the fact that immigration was among the main reasons for Brexit.

¹ 2017-04-25 Drafted by Dr Rosarii Griffin, Chair & Brexit Officer of UCCRSA on behalf of the UCCRSA Committee

Brexit Fallout for Partnership

The UK and Irish Universities have a long, successful history in working together in areas of academic research endeavour. For instance, the UK and Ireland's Higher Education structures, curricula, quality control and peer review mechanisms are heavily reliant on each other. 45,000 EU academics are employed in the UK HE sector, 12,500 of which are Irish. The UK has also traditionally partnered with Ireland in attaining large research grants. Prior to Brexit, having a UK higher education institution on an EU research grant proposal was perceived as a strength, as UK research output is typically impressive, rigorous and innovative. Since Brexit, given the upheaval *vis-a-vis* EU membership and research funding, having a UK partner is now feared a possible liability. Anecdotally, the UK have reportedly been dropped from a number of EU H2020 proposals because of Brexit uncertainties, despite EU Council reassurances to the contrary. But many EU HEI partners remain unconvinced.

With Brexit, there is considerable uncertainty on how this will affect:

- a) The HEI academic and research relationships between UK and Ireland, and
- b) Irish researcher/academics' status as EU citizens living in the UK

UCCRSA believes that Ireland should lobby to retain the current advantageous HEI relationship between Ireland and the UK, pertaining to academic freedom of mobility for research and innovation.

Post-Brexit Opportunities for Irish Higher Education

It should be recognised that Brexit may bring some opportunities for Ireland. Highly successful European academic researchers may want to work in another EU English-language speaking country, given its importance in global development. In theory, Post-Brexit, Ireland should be the country of choice as it retains EU membership. However, we know that many EU countries now work through the medium of English, which as an Irish Advantage 'pull-factor', may be slipping away. It is also widely perceived within some EU members (not familiar with the history or geography of Ireland) believe that the Republic of Ireland is part of the UK, and is also leaving the Europe Union. Hence, the UCCRSA advocates for the Government of Ireland (ROI) to raise its HEI profile within the EU as an active and current EU member state open for business.

Is the Irish HEI Sector prepared for the Brexit fallout? Unfortunately not. The Irish government needs to inject a massive amount of funding into capacity within the HE sector in the region of €500 million euro in order to prepare for the imminent impact of Brexit. Following a decade of austerity, Ireland needs to reinvest in the HEI sector in order to attract (and retain) the brightest academic and research staff. It is long proven that the higher education sector can assist economic growth up to 4% in terms of GDP. Ireland needs to capitalise on this, and prepare to receive the outflow of net benefits Post-Brexit.

With Article 50 triggered in March 2017, the Irish Higher Education sector must work to consolidate its relationship with the UK, as well as plan to capitalise on any potential Brexit losses which may accrue to Ireland's advantage. If the HEI

sector fails to act, Ireland will find itself on a further downward international spiral in terms of its global HEI competitiveness. Ireland will fail to attract top researchers to a higher education system neither supported nationally nor globally regarded. Therefore, the UCCRSA urges the Irish government to invest in HE *as a public good* at this critical juncture, especially in relation to building research and academic staff capacity. For these reasons and more, the UCCRSA advocates the following positions to be taken re: BREXIT

- Ireland and the UK to maintain the Common Travel Area (CTA) that existed prior to joining the EU, and that freedom of movement should continue between the two isles, particularly in the light of supporting academic freedom and the free movement of people and ideas.
- Ireland to advocate for a common approach (similar to the CTA) to protect the special and inter-dependent research relationships that exists between the UK and Ireland HEI sectors.
- Ireland to continue to partner with the UK in the acquisition of EU funding, and continue to nurture close collaborations with UK universities vis-à-vis all areas of HEI academic/research endeavour.
- As some areas of research may suffer disproportionately from Brexit – UCCRSA advocates for some form of critical analysis to be undertaken so that disciplines which are particular at risk are targeted with specific and timely funding interventions.
- The Irish Government to invest heavily in the Irish HEI sector to benefit from any potential fallout from Brexit in **attracting and retaining** star research/academic staff and potentially lucrative EU grant-holders.
- The Government of Ireland should align researcher career frameworks with academic salary scales, and offer parity in terms of security of tenure, in relation to the terms and conditions of employment.
- Ireland should invest heavily in the Research Divisions of its HEI sector as these currently feed into teaching and learning, and research, and serve as a fertile feeding ground for future generations of students, SMEs, businesses, and research and academic scientists giving them the knowledge and know-how to meet future societal, economic and global challenges.
- Finally, the HEI sector, and particularly the research dimension to HEI life, must be properly funded and nurtured as ‘a public good’.