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STUDENT MOBILITY IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND

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AN INSTITIÚID UM THAIGHDE EACNAMAÍOCHTA AGUS SÓISIALTA
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ABBREVIATIONS

CAO	Central Applications Office
CCEA	Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate
GB	Great Britain (England, Wales and Scotland)
HE	Higher education
HEA	Higher Education Authority
HEI	Higher education institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
MASN	Maximum Aggregate Student Number
NI	Northern Ireland
RCT	Rational Choice Theory
RUK	Rest of the UK
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UK	United Kingdom (Great Britain and Northern Ireland)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

There has been an increasing focus in policy development internationally and in Ireland on the globalisation of higher education and student mobility. Consequently, a growing body of international research has focussed on the drivers of, and barriers to, studying abroad. Previous studies on this topic have highlighted a number of macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors that shape students' experiences. However, there has been relatively little systematic research on the institutional factors which potentially influence student mobility between Ireland, Northern Ireland and Britain.

This study focuses on mobility for a whole undergraduate course (rather than mobility for an academic year or semester). It draws on administrative data, Central Applications Office (CAO) microdata, interviews with key stakeholders and a consultation event with stakeholders to address the following research questions:

- What is the level of student mobility between Ireland and Northern Ireland (and between NI and the other countries of the UK)? How has this changed over time, in particular during the pandemic?
- What factors are associated with student mobility?
- To what extent is there potential to increase student mobility across the island? And is this seen as a desirable objective by stakeholders?

MAIN FINDINGS

- In 2020/21, 1,170 students from Ireland went to study in Northern Ireland while 1,255 students from Northern Ireland attended a higher education institution (HEI) in Ireland. **Students from Ireland made up 2.4 per cent of students in Northern Ireland while students from Northern Ireland made up only 0.6 per students in Ireland.**
- More students from Ireland go to study in the rest of the UK than in Northern Ireland, with numbers staying stable over time at just over 4,000 each year.
- There is a **relatively large outflow of students from Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK** (RUK) (13,685 in 2020/21), reflecting at least in part high levels of competition for places, with very little mobility in the opposite direction.

- Only a minority of applicants from Northern Ireland or RUK make it all the way through to being offered and accepting a place in Irish HEIs. This is partly related to these candidates being less likely than those from Ireland to meet minimum matriculation requirements. This could reflect the nature of qualification recognition and/or applicants having less information about course requirements outside the jurisdiction. However, even when offered a place, those from Northern Ireland and RUK are less likely to accept the place, suggesting the impact of differential timing of course offers and/or using an application elsewhere as a safety-net in securing a high-demand course.
- Similarly, acceptance rates for UK universities are lower for Irish applicants than for those from the UK.
- Decision-making processes around where to study reflect the complex interaction of guidance provided at school level, the recognition of qualifications, tuition/registration fees and financial supports, and other living costs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Stakeholders highlight the value of mobility for students themselves, for higher education institutions and for enhancing cross-border cooperation. The findings indicate:

- There is potential for **school-based guidance** to provide greater awareness of options in other jurisdictions, a process which can be usefully supported by outreach work by HEIs.
- There is a **case to reexamine point equivalences for A-levels**, given the very small group of Northern Ireland candidates who take four A-levels, **and to look at modern foreign language requirements** (in courses where such skills are not critical), given much lower take-up of modern foreign languages in Northern Ireland.
- Decisions about where to study take place, for students, against a broader backdrop of rising costs and access to differential levels of financial supports and, for HEIs, funding challenges. It is **difficult to divorce the matter of student mobility from these wider issues of the adequacy of financial supports for students and funding levels** for the higher education sector. For example, the cap on places in Northern Ireland could usefully be revisited to enhance higher education participation in general and cross-border mobility. Overall, the study findings highlight the **need for coordinated interventions across different levels of both systems if student mobility is to be an important policy goal**.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND AIMS OF THE STUDY

Student mobility has been an important policy issue in many countries, particularly in the context of the internationalisation of higher education[1] (see, for example, Beech, 2019). The number of students studying abroad has grown and thus the topic has received increased academic attention (King et al., 2010; Rodríguez González et al., 2011). Students' academic mobility can be either inward or outward, from one country to another; or between regions in a single jurisdiction. The movement can be either short-term (e.g. exchange programmes) or last the duration of the programme/course. There has also been a good deal of attention to short-term mobility, for example, through the Erasmus programme, whereby students spend a term or a year abroad as part of their degree (see, for example, Van Mol and Timmerman, 2014; Courtois, 2017). However, such short-term mobility is outside the parameters of the current study.

Student mobility is generally considered a positive phenomenon, associated with a number of factors, including perceived higher-quality educational provision, lecturers, courses and facilities, compared to those available in the country of origin (Teichler, 2009), as well as gaining additional experience and building networks (Ackers et al., 2007). For higher education institutions, attracting international students is considered to improve institutional visibility in an international context (Helmi and Pius, 2018). Much of the existing literature on student mobility focuses on two aspects: student flows across countries and the experiences of students within host countries (Finn and Darmody, 2017).

A number of reports have been published on cross-border student flows (see Wakeling and Jefferies, 2013; Royal Irish Academy, 2022; British Council Ireland, 2022a; 2022b) and the extent of mobility of students from Northern Ireland to the other countries of the UK has long been a policy issue. However, these studies have not explored the institutional conditions underpinning decision-making to any great extent. This study seeks to contextualise mobility patterns and relate them to four sets of factors:

- The provision of information to students to inform their educational decision-making;

[1] Higher education refers to tertiary level courses offered in public or private institutions.

- The availability of higher education (HE) places overall and across fields of study;
- The criteria used for HE admission, that is, the recognition of different qualifications across the two jurisdictions;
- The costs associated with HE attendance (including tuition fees and accommodation costs) and the financial supports available to students.

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the level of student mobility between Ireland and Northern Ireland (and between NI and the other countries of the UK)? How has this changed over time, in particular during the pandemic?
2. What factors are associated with student mobility?
3. To what extent is there potential to increase student mobility across the island? And is this seen as a desirable objective by stakeholders?

In addressing these questions, the study focuses on undergraduate courses (because of the different factors at play in postgraduate decision-making) and on mobility for the whole of the higher education course (rather than exchange programmes).

1.2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON STUDENT MOBILITY

1.2.1 Theoretical background

Considering growing international interest in student mobility, existing studies have utilised various theories to guide their research. According to *Rational Choice Theory* (RCT), individuals are rational decision-makers whose actions are motivated by maximising self-interest, or a consideration of the relative costs and benefits attached to various decisions (Eriksson, 2011). Applied to education, such benefits may be linked to higher labour market or earnings returns (Browne, 2010). When the perceived future benefits outweigh the costs, students are more likely to be motivated to participate in higher education (DesJardins and Toutkoushian, 2005). The application of RCT to student mobility research has been criticised by Mowjee (2013), who argues that the decision to study abroad is not just driven by economic motivation regarding future benefits, but is also influenced by the social context, including family socio-economic and cultural characteristics as well as peer and teacher influences.

The *push/pull theory* is often applied in migration research, suggesting that people migrate because of factors that push them out of their existing countries and factors that pull them towards new ones (De Haas, 2021). In the context of student

mobility, push factors can include limited access to HE in a student's home country, a lack of high-quality education institutions or specific courses of interest, and lack of equitable access to HE, while pull factors may be associated with the prestige of the host institution, the availability of specific courses and opportunities for career development (Altbach, 2004; Bamber, 2014). The following section considers macro-, meso- and micro-level factors that capture the operation of push and pull mechanisms in educational decision-making.

1.2.2 Macro-, meso- and micro-level factors

International student mobility decisions can be related to macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors (Finn and Darmody, 2017). At a **macro-level**, the massification and internationalisation of HE, systemic support for study abroad as well as the increasing importance of international experience for professional employment are likely to act as push factors for study abroad (Waters et al., 2011). Moving abroad may also reflect a lack of domestic HE supply overall, or the distribution of HEIs in a student's home country (Whittaker, 2014). Important policies regarding student mobility concern recognition of academic credentials, a process that has become more complex over time (King, 2012). Academic recognition is essential in supporting a student's decision to undertake studies in a different country (West and Barham, 2009). The 1998 Sorbonne Declaration set in motion the idea of the creation of a European area of higher education with a view to promoting mobility and employability. This was further elaborated in the 1999 Bologna Declaration and the Lisbon Strategy in 2000. The European Commission has played an important role in supporting student mobility (especially short-term mobility through funded programmes) and in enhancing the recognition of qualifications, though the responsibility for admissions rests with specific higher education institutions in different administrative systems (West and Barham, 2009). Other macro-level factors include the withdrawal of the UK from the EU (Brexit) and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international travel (Peters et al., 2021). Brexit can be seen as a counter development to internationalisation efforts in HE (Riedl and Staubmann, 2021), and has implications for students aiming to study in the UK, but also for UK students studying abroad.[2] Research from the Institute of International Education (IIE) (2021) indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic altered the decision-making process of prospective students, with new enrolments falling in many destinations at the time.

Meso-level factors relate to institutional contexts and processes, whereby a student may seek to study at a higher prestige institution abroad or pursue selective or specialist courses (Whittaker, 2014). In addition to these institutional

[2] The UK government decided not to seek participation in the new Erasmus+ programme and has set up the Turing Scheme – the UK government's global programme to study and work abroad. The scheme provides funding for international opportunities in education and training across the world.

factors, the decision to study abroad may also be influenced by social networks, such as knowing others, particularly friends, who have studied abroad (Beech, 2019; Cairns and Smyth, 2011). The likelihood of studying abroad may also be linked to school experiences. School-based career guidance is an important factor in influencing students' post-secondary school pathways (Hooley and Rice, 2018; Rogers et al., 2020). Guidance provision is a potential resource for secondary school students who may consider applying for study abroad. However, the nature of the guidance given tends to be variable, reflecting time and resource allocation (Nightingale et al., 2020). School-based guidance provision can be particularly useful for some groups of students: young people from less advantaged backgrounds and those attending schools with a concentration of working-class students are more reliant on school-based sources of information (Smyth, 2022). Insufficient advice and encouragement from academic staff have been shown to deter undergraduate students from spending part of the degree studying abroad (British Council, 2015).

At a **micro-level**, students' background characteristics play an important role in their decision to study abroad (Findlay, 2011; Van Mol and Timmerman, 2014). For example, both a higher socio-economic background (Whittaker, 2014) and prior (personal or familial) experiences of mobility increase the likelihood of studying abroad (Findlay and King, 2010; Souto-Otero and McCoshan, 2006), as does the level of parental education (Miller, 2008; Pope et al., 2014; Kim and Lawrence, 2021). Social background factors dovetail with the financial costs associated with mobility (Orr et al., 2011) and the high achievement levels expected by the family (Brooks and Waters, 2010; 2011). In recent years, female participation in higher education has grown (OECD, 2021), with girls more likely than boys to aspire to enter higher education (Osborne, 2006). Previous research has shown that female participation in study abroad programmes also tends to be higher than male participation (Di Pietro, 2022; British Council Ireland, 2022a; Van Mol, 2022). Given their greater care responsibilities, older students are less likely to study abroad (Pope et al., 2014). Another potential barrier to studying abroad is a low level of proficiency in the language of the destination country (López-Duarte et al., 2021).

1.2.3 Costs involved in studying abroad

Existing research has highlighted various barriers to student mobility. One of the more important factors is the cost involved in studying abroad (Teichler, 2009; Whittaker, 2014; Souto-Otero et al., 2013). The level of **tuition fees** and the application of different fee rates to different categories of students tends to vary across countries (for an overview, see Eurydice, 2017). Over time, there has been an increasing focus across Europe on recruiting non-EU students who bring in higher fees (Findlay, 2011). The role of expenses in decision-making is complex, however. For example, students are not necessarily incentivised to move to

another jurisdiction because of higher fees in the home country, but may, however, be discouraged from moving if fees are lower in the country of origin (Wakeling and Jefferies, 2013). Financial support mechanisms also vary. Student grants and loans are often available only for domestic students. For Irish students, the Common Travel Area (CTA) positively affects treatment of fee levels for Irish and British citizens. The operation of these factors in Ireland, Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2. Across Europe, the majority of students receive at least some support in cash and in kind from their family, with family income making up over a third of their total monthly income compared with 14 per cent from public student support programmes (Eurostudent, 2021). Part-time employment also represents an important income for students (Eurostudent, 2021). However, moving abroad to study may mean that students have less access to social networks to help secure jobs and may lack sufficient language proficiency to obtain work.

Another major factor is the cost associated with **accommodation**, considering the rising cost of rented accommodation across European countries (Hauschildt et al., 2015). Accommodation has been found to be one of the main challenges facing international students in Ireland (Clarke et al., 2018). According to the Eurostudent report (2021, p. 96), students who do not live with their parents allocate, on average across countries, 35 per cent of their total monthly expenses (including transfers in kind) to accommodation, although the amounts tend to vary across countries (ibid.). Other costly items include food and transport (ibid.). In Ireland, 62 per cent of full-time undergraduates live with their parents or other family members (HEA, 2022a). The proportion enrolled in first degrees in HEIs in Northern Ireland living with their parents is lower than in Ireland – at 42 per cent of the total in 2021/22 (HESA online data, Table 57).[3]

1.3 RESEARCH ON MOBILITY BETWEEN IRELAND, NORTHERN IRELAND AND BRITAIN

There is a growing body of research on mobility between the countries of the UK, looking at the way in which institutional differences shape educational decision-making. In the UK, over the period 1996 to 2010, there was a declining tendency of students to apply to, and enter, higher education in another UK country. This was partly due to the role of devolution in leading to differential fees across countries as well as to differences in the supply of places (Raffe and Croxford, 2013). The proportion applying outside of Scotland declined most steeply, when the abolition of fees there (for Scottish-domiciled students) provided an incentive to study locally. Mobility rates out of England were found to be very low, especially to Northern Ireland. Applicants from Northern Ireland and Wales were more likely to apply to institutions elsewhere compared to those from England and Scotland.

[3] https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students.

Patterns of movement are found to reflect cultural ties and historical migration trends (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2020). Mobility rates were found to be higher among those from higher managerial and professional backgrounds, those with higher UCAS tariff scores and those applying for medical-related courses (Raffe and Croxford, 2013; Croxford and Raffe, 2014). University status was also associated with the likelihood of moving, with movers from England and Scotland more likely than stayers to enter older, higher status institutions (Whittaker, 2014; Whittaker et al., 2015; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). Even within the countries of the UK, students from working-class backgrounds are more likely to remain in the local area or region for higher education (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018; Minty, 2021).

A number of policy-focused reports have focused on movement between Ireland and Northern Ireland, and between Ireland and Britain. A joint report between the Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education and Skills (2015) highlighted a fall between 2009/10 and 2013/14 in the number of young people from Ireland applying to HEIs in Northern Ireland while there had been an increase in those applying from Northern Ireland to HEIs in Ireland over the same time period. Applicants were most commonly in 'subjects allied to medicine', with this field of study making up 38 per cent of Ireland-domiciled applications in 2013/14. However, patterns of actual enrolment were different, with a decline in mobility over time among both Ireland- and Northern Ireland-domiciled students. HEA (2018) also documented student flows between Ireland and Northern Ireland, but over the slightly later period of 2012/13 to 2016/17, describing this flow as 'a key element of cultural and educational collaboration between the two jurisdictions'. The report documented increasing numbers going from Northern Ireland to Ireland but a decline in the reverse direction. Mobile students at undergraduate level were more likely to be female, with postgraduate students being more gender balanced. Access to medical-related courses played an important part in student mobility.

In 2021, a Royal Irish Academy report (2021) highlighted the need to encourage and incentivise greater cross-border collaboration in higher education and to enhance staff and student mobility North-South and East-West. A related discussion paper (RIA, 2022) pointed to potential barriers to mobility, including a lack of information about options and applications processes, the equivalences between A-level and Leaving Certificates and the high cost of living in Ireland. The paper indicated 'ongoing concern that … A-level applicants [are] at a significant disadvantage' and highlighted the need for a review of course requirements. The paper suggested the need for greater provision of specific information for applicants based in Northern Ireland along with a social media campaign directed at teachers and students.

The Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science report[4] (2022) highlighted 'very little progress … in terms of increasing cross border student enrolment'. The report highlighted a number of barriers to mobility, in keeping with earlier policy documents. It suggested that the qualification equivalences disadvantaged students from Northern Ireland, given that the majority of students take three A-levels, and many do not have the foreign language needed for access to some courses. Other barriers highlighted related to the lack of guidance/information on options, access to financial supports, accommodation costs and Brexit uncertainty. It recommended setting targets for cross-border mobility, with the HEA tasked with promoting mobility, an outreach campaign, an examination of qualification equivalences, ensuring consistency of supports and promoting cross-border transport links, among other measures.

British Council Ireland (2022a) used administrative data and qualitative interviews to document student movement between Ireland and the UK. The report documented a fall in applications between 2013 and 2018 but an increase from 2019 onwards.[5] Irish applicants are disproportionately female compared to other international applicants, a pattern attributed to the greater rates of application for nursing and related studies. Students from Ireland are more likely to apply for HEIs in Scotland and Northern Ireland than other nationalities (ibid.). Qualitative interviews point to the importance of personal recommendations (from family or friends) and the variety of course options as key influences. Some students were positive about the use of a personal statement in the UCAS admissions process (British Council Ireland, 2022b). Accommodation availability was also seen as a positive factor given high rents in Dublin and other Irish cities while ease of travel was seen as conducive to keeping costs low. Barriers included a lack of information around funding and about the UCAS points system. The report recommended increasing the presence of UK HEIs in Ireland through events, school visits and social media as well as developing accessible guidance for prospective students (see British Council Ireland, 2022c).

1.4 METHODOLOGY

This study draws on administrative data, qualitative interviews with stakeholders and a consultation with policymakers to document the nature of current mobility patterns and the implications for policy in both jurisdictions. This mixed methods approach has previously proved successful in highlighting policy issues in areas with little systematic research comparing Ireland and Northern Ireland (Smyth et al., 2022; Curristan et al., 2023).

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4 This report and HEA (2018) also consider further education flows but they are outside the parameters of the current study so are not discussed here.

5 It should be noted that the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a drop in university applications from overseas students more generally (Di Pietro, 2023).

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) are used to document the number of students from Ireland and Northern Ireland studying undergraduate courses in institutions in Britain over the past decade, the institutions they attend and the fields of study they pursue. UCAS data are used to look at the numbers of applications to different institutions and how these vary by domicile. Within Ireland, data from the Higher Education Authority are used to look at the domicile of students across different institutions, types of courses and fields of study. Microdata from the Central Applications Office (CAO) are used to look at patterns of applications and acceptance rates by domicile for 2019 and 2022, capturing both the pre- and post-pandemic periods. These analyses of administrative data are supplemented with qualitative interviews with 14 key stakeholders drawn from the areas of career guidance, admissions and higher education policy in Ireland and Northern Ireland. An effort was made to include participants from universities in Britain but only one interviewee could be secured. Tailored to the specific role of each stakeholder, the interviews covered perceptions of current enablers of, and barriers to, student mobility and the potential for further cross-border cooperation in relation to higher education. The report also draws on feedback from a consultation event with key stakeholders held on 25 May 2023.

1.5 REPORT OUTLINE

Chapter 2 discusses the institutional contexts for higher education in Ireland and Northern Ireland, focusing on school-based guidance, criteria for higher education admissions, the costs involved and available financial supports. Chapter 3 draws on administrative data to document the patterns of higher education application and enrolment by domicile. Chapter 4 summarises the main findings of the study and discusses the implications for policy.

CHAPTER 2

The policy context: institutional factors influencing student mobility

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Student mobility can be influenced by various global, national, institutional and individual-level factors (see Chapter 1). How these factors impact on students' decision-making to study abroad differs across countries. This chapter aims to provide an insight into the institutional mechanisms that may act as push and pull factors in educational decision-making among young people in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Britain.

2.2 SCHOOL-BASED GUIDANCE ACROSS JURISDICTIONS

Access to advice and guidance enables students to make effective choices and decisions about their post-school personal educational and employment goals and trajectories. Institutional factors (school, governmental policies) are intertwined with personal ones (socio-economic background, gender) in shaping students' post-school decision-making. School-based guidance provision can also play an important role in fostering student mobility.

2.2.1 School-based guidance provision in Ireland

In Irish second-level schools, guidance encompasses the three separate, but interlinked, areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance. The service is provided by registered teachers with additional training and qualifications in guidance counselling. Guidance counsellors are allocated to schools on the basis of student numbers, after a post-recession period without an ex quota allocation (Leahy et al., 2017). Unlike in many other jurisdictions, guidance counsellors in Ireland provide personal support to students as well as educational and career guidance, creating some challenges around adequate time to address both sets of needs (Hearne et al., 2016). In July 2018, a Department of Education policy statement on *Wellbeing 2018-2023* was issued, highlighting the importance of whole-school guidance. Whole School Guidance Plans outline the school's approach to guidance generally and how students can be supported and assisted in making choices and successful transitions in the personal and social, educational and career areas. Research has highlighted variation across schools in access to one-to-one sessions with guidance counsellors, with subject teachers and class tutors/year heads playing a more important role for young people attending schools serving disadvantaged communities (Smyth, 2022).

2.2.2 School-based guidance provision in Northern Ireland

There are two main strands to guidance provision in Northern Ireland.[6] Careers education in schools is provided by careers teachers, and this career education:

> *…includes taught timetabled provision which includes meaningful opportunities for progressive personal career planning; realistic and meaningful cross curricular opportunities for development of employability skills; and opportunities for planned and relevant work-related learning experience.* (Department for Employment and Learning and Department of Education, 2016, p. 13)

In addition, students receive one-to-one guidance sessions with career advisors from the Department for the Economy (DfE) Careers Service, usually from Year 12 onwards.

Schools are legally required to provide details of the steps taken in relation to careers education, including the provision of careers guidance (Hughes and Percy, 2022). Careers education in post-primary schools is externally assessed by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) as part of the school inspection process. A review of guidance conducted by Hughes and Percy (2022) highlighted the need for career-related learning to start early (at primary level), to develop a new, rebranded careers portal and the need for a new blended career guidance model with targeted and tailored supports. Students interviewed for their consultation saw individual meetings with career advisors as the best approach, though most also relied on family and subject teachers for information.

2.3 QUALIFICATION RECOGNITION AND CRITERIA FOR HE ENTRY

Entry into higher education is organised through admission systems that aim to ensure students have the necessary level of education, knowledge and skills to succeed in their chosen course. However, the criteria used can vary across countries and, within countries, across institutions. However entry is often determined by exam performance, the type of subjects studied at secondary level, standardised test scores, personal statements or interviews, or some combination thereof (McGrath et al., 2014). Differences between national higher education systems can lead to problems concerning the recognition of qualifications and mobility periods abroad. This section considers bilateral arrangements to ensure the mutual recognition of Irish and UK qualifications in the higher education applications process and the implications for student enrolment patterns.

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6 Guidance provision differs in England, Scotland and Wales, but is not discussed here.

TABLE 2.1 OVERVIEW OF APPLICATION PROCESS TO HEIS IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND

Feature	Ireland	Northern Ireland
Application pathway	Centralised through CAO	Centralised through UCAS
Number of grades counted	6 Leaving Certificate or up to four A-levels or 3 A-levels and 1 AS level	No set maximum for UCAS scores; HEIs vary in no. of subjects counted
Specific subject entry requirements	For some HEIs/courses	For some HEIs/courses but subjects more important in selection
Modern foreign language entry requirement	For some HEIs/courses	Only for language-relevant courses
Timing of offers	After Leaving Certificate results issued (August/September)	Conditional offers prior to sitting A-levels
Other criteria	Only for a small no. of courses	Teacher-predicted grades Personal statement

Source: CAO and UCAS websites.

Table 2.1 provides an overview of the main features of the application processes in Ireland and Northern Ireland. In **Ireland**, higher education application occurs through the Central Applications Office (CAO) process, with candidates allocated 'points' on the basis of the Leaving Certificate subject level taken and the grade received, with the best six subjects counted for points purposes (Table 2.2).[7] Bonus points are awarded for higher level Maths. The maximum points achievable are 625. The competitive nature of the process means that the points required for entry vary across institutions and courses and over time. As well as using the points system, HEIs often set minimum standards, known as matriculation requirements, for entry; these usually involve having a pass grade in English and Irish and four other subjects, though some HEIs (and/or courses) also specify a pass grade in Maths and another language. In addition, some fields of study, such as medical- and science-related courses, specify requirements in these subject areas. Overall, however, subject choice at secondary level plays less of a role in HE access in Ireland than in the UK (Iannelli et al., 2016).

7 Alternative pathways are also available on the basis of socio-economic disadvantage, disability/SEN and mature entry.

TABLE 2.2 CALCULATION OF COMMON POINTS SCALE FOR A-LEVELS WITH LEAVING CERTIFICATE HIGHER GRADE AS A COMPARATOR

Grade	Points for best 3 A-levels	4th A-level	AS level	Leaving Certificate grades	Points
A*	185	45 (74)	31	H1	100
A	156	38 (62)	26	H2	88
B	131	32 (52)	22	H3	77
C	106	26 (42)	18	H4	66
D	84	20 (34)	14	H5	56
E	63	15 (25)	11	H6	46
E or above in Maths, Further Maths or Pure Maths	+25			H7	37
				H6 or above in Maths	+25

Source: CAO website.
Note: Figures in parentheses refer to points calculation for fourth A-level or AS level for Technological Universities and Institutes of Technology.

Candidates from Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK can apply to Irish HEIs through the CAO process, with an established points equivalence for A-level grades (see Table 2.2). Applicants are scored on their best four A-levels or on three A-levels and an AS level grade. There has been no public discussion in the higher education sector of the basis for these grade equivalences, though there have been some changes over time with a revision in 2010 to take account of the introduction of A* grades and further changes in 2016 and 2019 to increase the points awarded to A-level grades.[8] Thus, candidates achieving three A* grades would have received 450 points in 2015, 540 points in 2016 and 555 points in 2019.

Applicants taking the Irish Leaving Certificate can score maximum points (625) by achieving H1 grades in six subjects (including Maths). However, applicants from Northern Ireland can only score maximum points if they achieve four A* A-level grades (including an A* in Maths, Further Maths or Pure Maths). Available data show that very few young people take a fourth A-level in Northern Ireland. Figures are not available across all exam boards. However, a special tabulation from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) indicates that, in 2022, only 3.6 per cent of candidates sat four or more A-levels (Table 2.3), with only 0.8 per cent of the whole cohort achieving four A* grades. This compares with 2.1 per cent of CAO applicants who achieve the maximum 625 points in the Leaving Certificate. The pattern indicates that Northern Ireland candidates appear at a disadvantage in relation to high-points courses. However, many courses have lower points requirements and relative performance levels in the A-levels and Leaving Certificate introduce further complexity in relation to comparisons.

8 We are grateful to Kevin Keady of the CAO for providing detail on the scheme changes.

In 2022, 4 per cent of A-level candidates achieved three (or more) A* grades (CCEA, special tabulation), the equivalent of 555 CAO points. Looking at the points of the pool of Leaving Certificate CAO applicants[9], 15 per cent reach a level of 555 points or higher.

TABLE 2.3 PROPORTION OF CANDIDATES IN NORTHERN IRELAND TAKING FOUR OR MORE A-LEVELS IN A SINGLE ACADEMIC YEAR (CCEA ENTRIES)

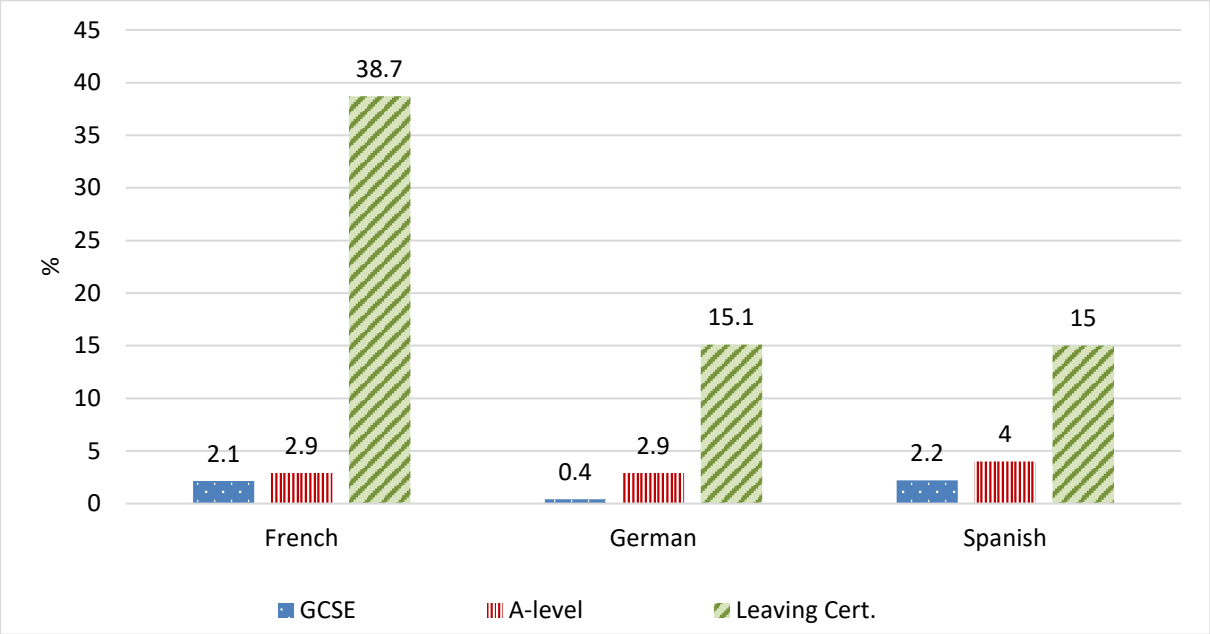
Grade	% taking four or more A-levels	Total no. of candidates
2019	3.0	10,370
2020	2.1	10,518
2021	3.2	11,263
2022	3.6	11,758

Source: CCEA special tabulation.
Note: This includes target age (18-year-old) students only.

Other course requirements can impact differently on candidates from Northern Ireland. While an exemption is given for Irish to those educated outside Ireland, many courses (especially arts/humanities and business) in Irish HEIs require a modern foreign language for matriculation purposes. It is not possible to systematically quantify the number of courses this affects. In NUI universities, a third language (other than English or Irish) must be included among the subjects for most degree programmes in Arts, Human Sciences, Law, Social Science, Commerce, Medicine and Health Sciences and some other degrees. Trinity College Dublin specifies a pass in a language other than English for matriculation to all courses. In contrast, Dublin City University or the technological universities do not appear to specify a modern foreign language as a general entry requirement. Unless the course involves modern foreign languages, having taken a language at GCSE level can meet the matriculation requirements. Figure 2.1 shows that only a very small proportion of (CCEA) GCSE or A-level candidates in Northern Ireland take a modern foreign language, with much higher levels of take-up among Leaving Certificate candidates.

[9] Thirteen per cent of all Leaving Certificate candidates score 550 points or higher.

FIGURE 2.1 PERCENTAGE OF GCSE, A-LEVEL AND LEAVING CERTIFICATE CANDIDATES TAKING MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN NORTHERN IRELAND, 2020/21



Source: CCEA and State Examinations Commission.

The application process for university in **Northern Ireland** and the rest of the UK is through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) process. Entry requirements vary across institutions and courses, with having taken particular subjects at school playing a more important role in selection than in Ireland (Iannelli et al., 2016). Points equivalences are available for Irish Leaving Certificate results (Table 2.4). However, some institutions and courses give minimum grade specifications rather than UCAS scores, and institutions vary as to whether they count five or six Leaving Certificate subjects for entry purposes. For example, Coventry University regards four H2s and an H3 as equivalent to three A-level A grades, while University of Edinburgh arts/humanities courses require H1 in three or more subjects and H2 in the remaining subjects (up to a maximum of six). Both universities in Northern Ireland give minimum grade specifications rather than using UCAS scores. The UCAS procedure differs from the CAO process in that applicants are required to submit predicted grades from their school (before the actual exam) and a personal statement regarding why they should be selected for the course.

TABLE 2.4 CALCULATION OF UCAS TARIFF SCORE FOR LEAVING CERTIFICATE APPLICANTS

Leaving Certificate higher grades	Points	Leaving Certificate ordinary grades	Points	A-level	Points
H1	36	O1	12	A*	56
H2	30	O2	10	A	48
H3	24	O3	8	B	40
H4	18	O4	6	C	32
H5	12			D	24
H6	9			E	16

Source: UCAS website.

A significant difference between the systems relates to the fact that applicants to UK universities can receive an offer (conditional or unconditional) prior to taking their final exams, with conditional offers then confirmed after exam results are issued (usually mid-August in Northern Ireland). In Ireland, students are not offered places until after the Leaving Certificate results have issued. Since the pandemic, there have been delays in the issuing of results and therefore HE place offers, with results issued on 2 September 2022. This has had consequences for the start of first-year undergraduate courses in Ireland and for the decision timeframe for those applying through both the CAO and UCAS systems (see Chapter 4).

The entry criteria for higher education in both systems reflect the interplay between the number of places available overall (and in particular institutions and courses) and the grades achieved by applicants. A key difference between the systems in Ireland and Northern Ireland relates to the cap on places in Northern Ireland for local students (including those from Ireland) using the Maximum Aggregate Student Number (MASN) formula driven by funding constraints. This has resulted in significant competition for places with 100 home applicants for every 60 places in Northern Ireland (i.e. 1.7 home applicants for every place) compared with 90 in Scotland, 120 in England and 130 in Wales (Pivotal, 2021). While the cap resulted in stability in student numbers in Northern Ireland, the number of Irish-domiciled students entering HEIs in Ireland increased by 4 per cent over the period 2016/17 to 2021/22 (HEA database, own calculations). Nonetheless, growing demand for higher education in Ireland means that in 2022 there were 1.4 home-domiciled applicants for every place, indicating a significant level of competition for places but not as marked as in Northern Ireland.

2.4 STUDENT FEES, SUPPORTS AND COSTS

2.4.1 Fees and charges

Across Europe, the price of attending university has increased notably in recent decades, with student fees an increasingly common funding source for HEIs (Kelchen, 2016). Student fees may comprise a variety of costs charged to students, including for example, tuition fees, enrolment, administration and examination fees (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). Student fees have traditionally been used to fund specific campus programmes such as student unions and recreational facilities, but the number and types of fees have increased substantially over the past two decades (Wang, 2013). There are differences between countries in how fee and support systems (including grants and loans) interact in higher education in Europe (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020). Full-time home students pay no fees in first-cycle programmes in Denmark, Greece, Cyprus, Malta, Finland, Sweden and Turkey. In some countries (e.g. Ireland) registration fees apply to all students, but some are exempt from paying fees, e.g. on the basis of their income. On average across Eurostudent countries, 57 per cent of students pay fees to higher education institutions (HEIs) (Eurostudent, 2021).

In **Ireland**, first-time undergraduate students attending publicly funded third-level courses do not have to pay tuition fees, subject to meeting residency requirements. Under the terms of the Free Fees Initiative, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science pays the fees to the HEIs instead. To qualify for free fees, a student must have been living in an EEA member state or Switzerland or the UK for at least three of the five years before starting the course; they must also be a citizen of one of these countries or have refugee status or leave to remain. A separate annual charge, known as a registration fee, is payable to HEIs for the costs of student services and examinations. The maximum rate of the student contribution for the academic year 2023-2024 is €3,000 (with a previous one-off reduction of fees of €1,000 in 2022/23). Students from Northern Ireland (and the rest of the UK) pay the registration fee on the same basis as students from Ireland.

TABLE 2.5 FEES BY COUNTRY OF DOMICILE AND LOCATION OF HEI

	Location of HEI				
Country of domicile	**Ireland**	**Northern Ireland**	**England**	**Scotland**	**Wales**
Ireland	€3,000 (£2,612)	£4,710	up to £9,250	up to £9,250	up to £9,000
Northern Ireland	€3,000 (£2,612)	£4,710	up to £9,250	up to £9,250	up to £9,000
England	€3,000 (£2,612)	£9,250	up to £9,250	up to £9,250	up to £9,000
Scotland	€3,000 (£2,612)	£9,250	up to £9,250	No fees	up to £9,000
Wales	€3,000 (£2,612)	£9,250	up to £9,250	up to £9,250	up to £9,000

Source: Authors' analysis.

The level of tuition fees in the UK varies by both the country of domicile and the location of the HEI (Table 2.5). Fees for HEIs in Northern Ireland are lower for students from Northern Ireland and Ireland than for those from the rest of the UK. The overall level of fees in Northern Ireland is also set at a lower rate than in the other countries of the UK. Students from Ireland and Northern Ireland pay the same rate as 'local' students in England and Wales. The situation in Scotland is different with Scottish-domiciled students exempt from fees. A similar exemption was applied to Irish-domiciled students prior to 2021/22. Students from Ireland and Northern Ireland therefore face different costs depending on where they go to university; the issue of non-tuition costs is discussed in Section 2.4.3.

2.4.2 Financial supports

In **Ireland**, undergraduate students who fall below certain income limits are eligible for a (non-repayable) SUSI maintenance grant and a waiver of the registration fee. Support is on a sliding scale, reflecting household income and family size, and varies by distance from the HEI, with higher rates for those who are 'non-adjacent' (more than 45 kilometres away) than for those who are 'adjacent'. In addition, a special rate is payable to very low income families who are dependent on social welfare payments. Those who are dependent on their parents are assessed on the gross income of their parents as well as any income of their own, with cut-offs for eligibility varying by family size and the number of children in higher education.[10] For the academic year 2023/24, rates vary from €556 (part maintenance, adjacent rate) to €6,971 (special rate, non-adjacent rate). There has been a lack of discussion about what level of living standards student grants should support. Previous research has shown that grant levels have fallen behind other benchmarks, such as

[10] Independent students, that is those over 23 years of age who are living independently from their parents, are assessed on the basis of their own gross income and that of their spouse or partner.

social welfare payments, over time (McCoy et al., 2010; Smyth, 2018; Indecon, 2022), a situation that is likely to have been further exacerbated by the dramatic rise in the costs of rental accommodation in recent years (see Section 2.4.3). Indecon (2022) estimate that the SUSI maintenance grant, on average, covers about 36 per cent of total undergraduate expenditure. For students above the specified income thresholds, the registration fee is paid upfront and is not covered by a student loan system, although students may seek commercial bank loans to cover the cost. There is a residence criterion so applicants must have lived in Ireland for three of the previous five years to quality for a maintenance grant. Thus, students from Northern Ireland (and the rest of the UK) are not generally entitled to a maintenance grant but, subject to means testing, may qualify for a grant to cover registration charges.

In **the UK**, a student loan system is in place, though the process and nature of supports varies across the four jurisdictions. There is a tuition fee loan which covers fees up to £9,250. Across the UK, there is a maintenance loan which is means tested, with the amounts varying by whether the student will be living with their parents and whether they are in or outside London. Students from Northern Ireland and Wales can avail of maintenance loans but those on lower income levels also receive a maintenance grant (non-repayable). The grant component in Northern Ireland ranges from £689 to £3,475. Both tuition and maintenance loans are repayable after graduation (subject to income thresholds, though with different interest rates between England/Wales and Northern Ireland/Scotland). Students from Ireland studying in the UK can apply for UK student loans for tuition fees (but not maintenance loans) but, depending on income, may be eligible for SUSI maintenance grants.

2.4.3 Cost of living and accommodation

The cost of living in Ireland and the UK is rising, affecting the finances of many families, and is likely to impact on students' decision to study abroad. The cost of living for students can vary depending on what part of the country they live in, what type of accommodation they choose, their transport options for travelling to and from classes, as well as a range of other factors. In Ireland, the cost of living increased by 25 per cent for students between 2011 and 2021/22, mainly because of higher accommodation prices (Indecon, 2022). It is estimated that maintenance grants cover one-third of undergraduate expenditure (ibid.). NUS-USI (2023) has argued that student supports in Northern Ireland have failed to keep pace with rising costs since 2010, echoing the National Union of Students UK (NUS) report (2022) that indicated a significant proportion of the student population find themselves exposed to the risk of significant debt on top of their student loans.

Accommodation can present a significant cost for students. These costs vary, depending on the type and location of accommodation. Students who do not live with their parents allocate, on average across Eurostudent countries, 35 per cent of their total monthly expenses (including transfers in kind) to accommodation, 23 per cent to food, and 7 per cent to transportation (Eurostudent, 2021). According to Berger (2019), lack of available accommodation and rising costs are one of the biggest issues affecting students. There is a trend of increasing accommodation costs for students not living with their parents between different waves of Eurostudent surveys, with country-specific variations. The Quacquarelli Symonds' International Student Survey[11] 2022 warned of the effect of increased cost-of-living on international student numbers, with 37 per cent of students regarding it as important when choosing a country to study in. Affordable cost of studying was considered a factor by 36 per cent of the students (QS, 2022). According to the IDP survey (IDP, 2023),[12] just over half of students say they are reconsidering their decision to study overseas due to recent increases in the cost of living.

It is difficult to systematically compare living costs for students in Ireland, Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK as the UK does not participate in the Eurostudent survey. Table 2.6 uses information from selected university websites to show the price of on-campus accommodation. Students from Northern Ireland face higher accommodation costs by moving, while students from Ireland face lower costs regardless of location.

TABLE 2.6 ACCOMMODATION COSTS FOR IRELAND AND SELECTED AREAS OF THE UK (£)

Location	On-campus accommodation (ensuite) for academic year 2023/4
Ireland	7,085 (TCD)
Northern Ireland	5,600 (QUB)
Scotland	5,764 (Edinburgh)
North-West England	6,097 (Liverpool)
London	6,784 (UCL)

Source: Information from selected university websites.

2.5 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has outlined the institutional context within which young people make decisions about their study location. In both Ireland and Northern Ireland, students have access to school-based information and guidance about higher education

11 The International Student Survey (ISS) is an annual survey of pre-enrolment international higher education students who have expressed an interest in studying outside of their home country.

12 This survey examines the attitudes and intentions of over 21,000 prospective and current international students from over 100 countries between February 27 to March 19, 2023.

options, although there has been no research to date on how well informed students are about course options in other countries. There are established systems for qualification recognition for the purposes of higher education entry. However, candidates from Northern Ireland can only achieve maximum CAO points if they take four A-levels, limiting high-points courses to a very small number of students. Candidates from Northern Ireland may be further disadvantaged in accessing courses that require a modern foreign language, given the much smaller number taking these subjects at GCSE or A-level than among their Leaving Certificate counterparts. The nature of the competition for places and consequent entry standards are also shaped by the number of higher education places, with the current cap on places in Northern Ireland resulting in greater competition than in other parts of the UK. Students face different potential costs and receive different levels of support depending on their domicile (country of origin) and the location of the HEI they attend, resulting in a complex trade-off of tuition costs and accommodation and living costs. The extent to which these factors impact on student flows is explored in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3

Patterns of higher education applications and acceptances across jurisdictions

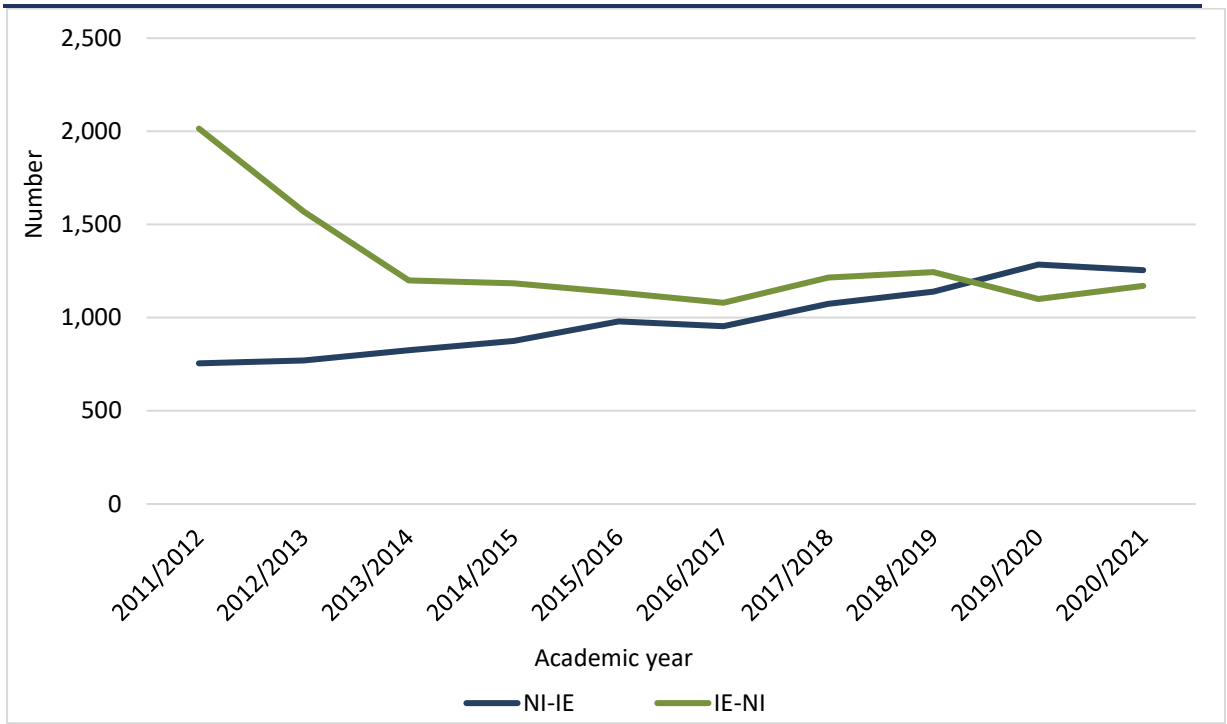
3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter looks at patterns of applications and acceptances to higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland, Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. Section 3.2 looks at overall trends in higher education entry by domicile of students, spanning the period before and in the wake of the pandemic. Section 3.3 uses Central Application Office (CAO) microdata to look at patterns of applications and acceptances to HEIs in Ireland while Section 3.4 draws on published UCAS data to examine the patterns of applications of students from Ireland and Northern Ireland to universities in Britain.

3.2 TRENDS OVER TIME IN HIGHER EDUCATION ENROLMENTS

This section looks at the number of cross-border enrolments and mobility between Ireland, Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK before Section 3.3 unpacks the dynamics of applications, eligibility and acceptances underlying these patterns. Figure 3.1 shows patterns of movement over the period 2011/12 to 2020/21. At the beginning of the period, the number of students domiciled in Ireland who attended HEIs in Northern Ireland was much greater than the number from Northern Ireland who enrolled in HEIs in Ireland. The numbers from Ireland had declined by 2013/14, remaining relatively stable thereafter, even in the context of an increasing cohort of Leaving Certificate students. In contrast, enrolments from Northern Ireland students increased somewhat over time, to the point where overall numbers were broadly similar by 2020/21.

FIGURE 3.1 CROSS-BORDER UNDERGRADUATE ENROLMENTS 2011/12-2020/21



Source: HEA and HESA/Northern Ireland Department of the Economy.
Note: HESA data are rounded to the nearest five.

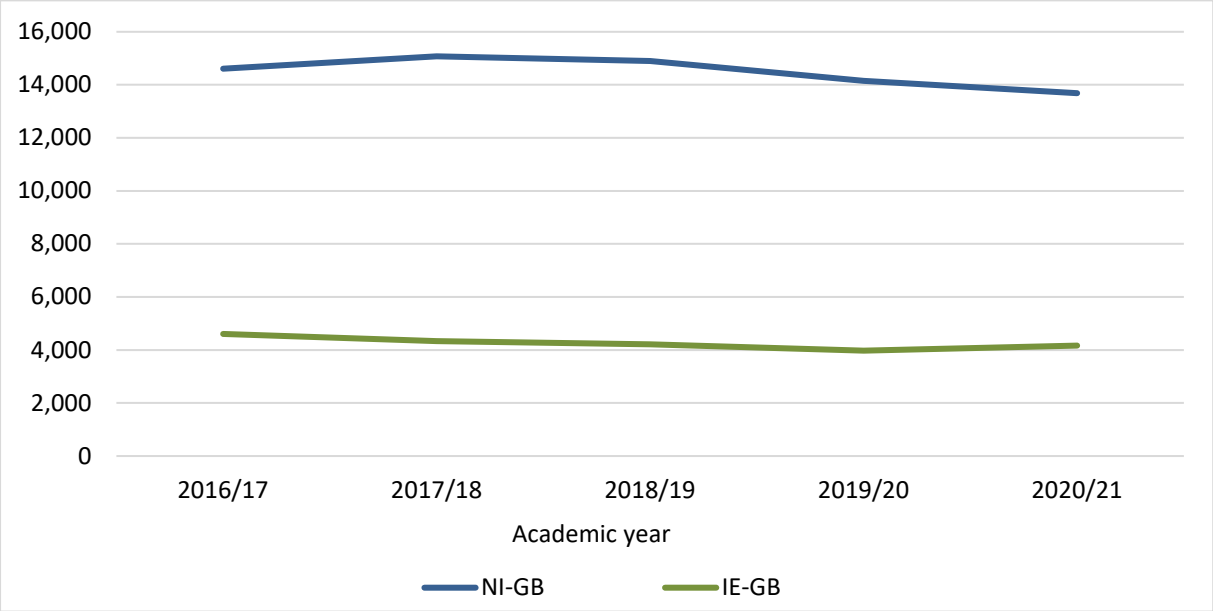
Table 3.1 places these trends in the context of broader inflows and outflows. Flows into HEIs in Ireland from the rest of the UK were larger than those from Northern Ireland at the beginning of the period, but enrolments from Britain declined after 2015/16, with more NI than RUK students thereafter. Enrolments from outside the EU increased markedly over time, with some increase in the numbers coming from other EU countries. At the beginning of the period, flows into HEIs in Northern Ireland from Ireland were greater than flows from the rest of the UK, but by 2014/15 students from Britain outnumbered those from Ireland. Northern Ireland HEIs have seen an increase over time in non-EU enrolments, especially since 2019/20, though enrolments from the rest of the EU are low. Overall in 2019/20, students from Ireland made up 2.4 per cent of the student population in Northern Ireland while students from Northern Ireland made up just 0.7 per cent of the student population in Ireland.

TABLE 3.1 UNDERGRADUATE ENROLMENTS IN IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND, 2016/17 TO 2020/21

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
HEIs in Ireland										
Ireland	154,850	155,515	156,675	157,625	162,555	163,780	167,180	168,410	173,195	175,760
Northern Ireland	755	770	825	875	980	955	1,075	1,140	1,285	1,255
Rest of UK	930	990	1,150	1,140	1,155	760	710	940	680	880
Other EU	1,160	1,175	1,390	1,480	1,795	1,770	1,835	2,320	1,935	2,290
Non-EU	5,795	7,515	9,750	10,925	12,105	11,920	12,290	13,060	12,710	9,865
Unknown	235	115	90	215	315	320	525	300	130	105
HEIs in Northern Ireland										
Ireland	2,015	1,610	1,200	1,185	1,135	1,080	1,215	1,245	1,100	1,170
Northern Ireland	40,200	40,190	40,060	40,090	39,775	38,785	37,760	37,750	37,570	38,355
Rest of UK	845	925	1,055	1,675	1,705	1,750	1,595	1,725	1,620	1,615
Other EU	160	160	135	200	170	170	205	180	175	195
Non-EU	1,765	1,870	1,900	1,695	1,480	1,480	1,595	1,730	4,655	7,025

Source: HEA and HESA/Northern Ireland Department of the Economy.
Note: HESA data are rounded to the nearest five.

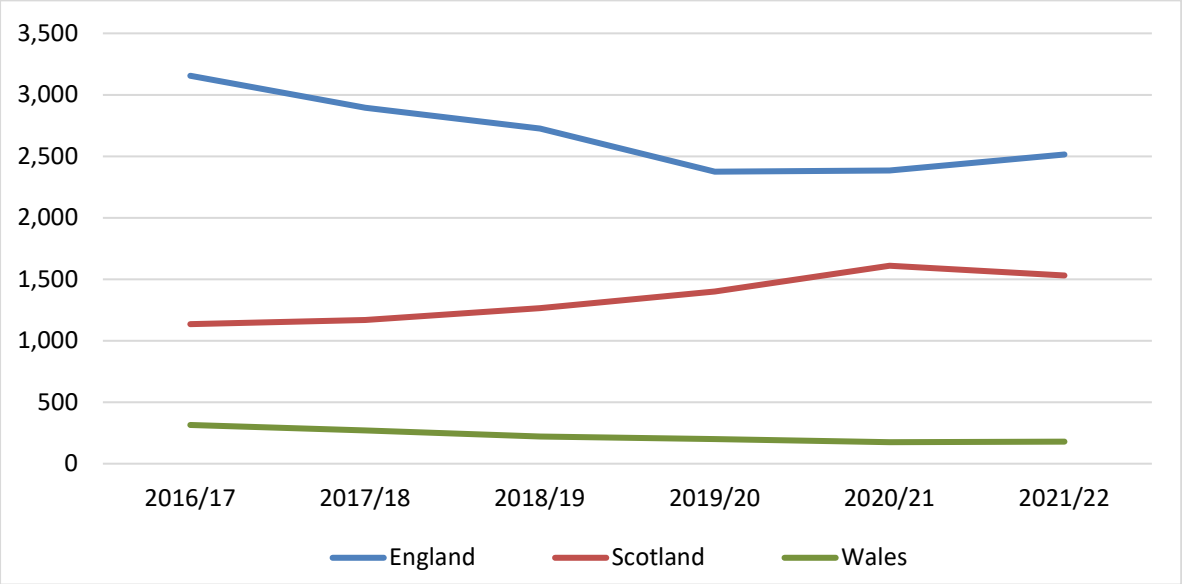
FIGURE 3.2 FLOW OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS FROM IRELAND AND NORTHERN IRELAND TO THE REST OF THE UK 2016/17 – 2020/21



Source: HESA and Northern Ireland Department of the Economy.
Note: HESA data are rounded to the nearest five.

Figure 3.2 shows a very substantial number of students from Northern Ireland attend university in the rest of the UK, though this drops slightly from 14,610 in 2016/17 to 14,155 in 2019/20 (with a further fall to 13,685 during the pandemic). Flows from Ireland to Britain remain broadly stable over time, at around 4,000 students each year. However, there has been a change in the destination countries, with a decline in enrolment in English universities and an increase in those going to Scottish universities (Figure 3.3). The academic year 2021/22 saw a change in fee policies in Scotland, with the rest of the UK fee rate applying to students from Ireland (see Chapter 2). This appeared to result to a slight shift from enrolment in Scotland to England/Wales, but more recent figures would be needed to identify a real trend.

FIGURE 3.3 FLOW OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS FROM IRELAND TO BRITAIN 2016/17–2020/21



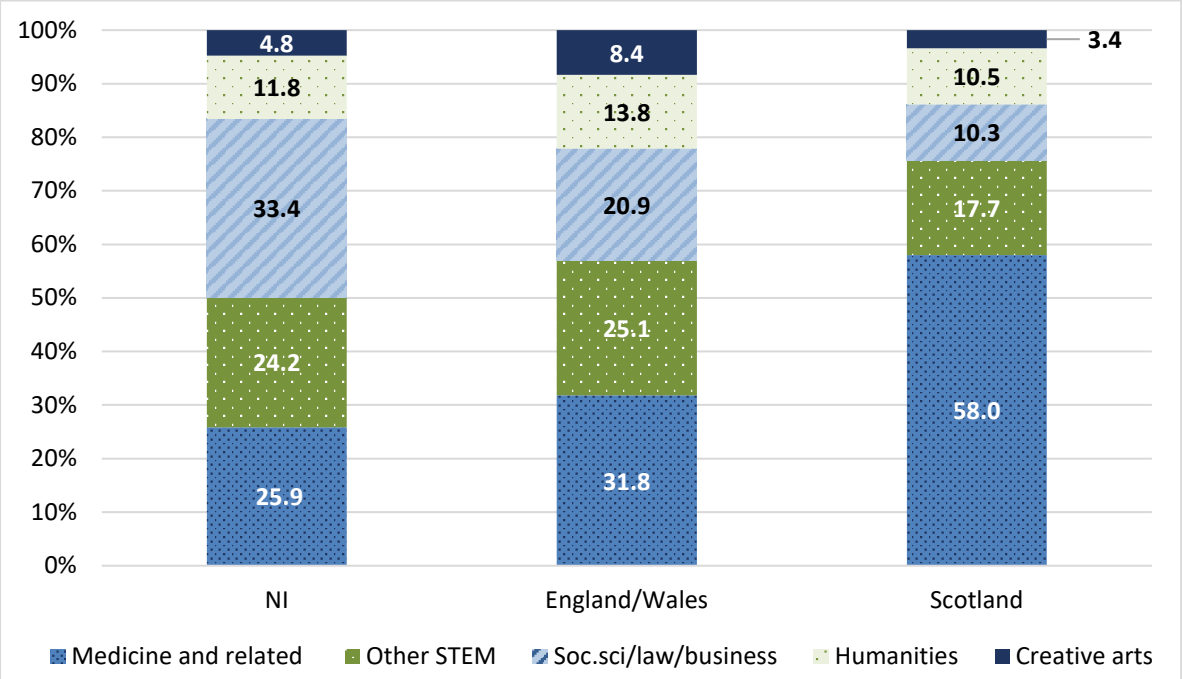
Source: HESA.
Note: HESA data are rounded to the nearest five.

Published and open access data reveal interesting insights into the profile of students who study in another jurisdiction. Female students make up a higher proportion of mobile students relative to their representation among undergraduate enrolments. In 2011/12, women made up 56 per cent of Northern Ireland undergraduate students enrolled in Ireland and this was 57 per cent in 2015/16 (HEA, 2018). Thereafter the proportion female remained relatively stable at around 56-57 per cent, increasing to 60 per cent in 2021/22 (HEA online student data). Two-thirds of undergraduate students from Ireland enrolled in Northern Ireland were female in both 2011/12 and 2015/16 (HEA, 2018). The gender breakdown is not provided separately for undergraduate students in subsequent years. However, HEA (2022) indicates that women made up 63 per cent of all Northern Ireland students studying in Ireland in 2021/22, similar to the gender profile of students from England but lower than the figure for students from Scotland (73 per cent).

Information on the field of study taken by mobile students is only available for undergraduate and postgraduate studies combined. Nonetheless, the patterns show the nature of student demand for particular courses. A very substantial number of students from Ireland are enrolling elsewhere to pursue medicine-related courses, with the majority (58 per cent) of those going to Scotland taking such courses (Figure 3.4). Around a third of students from Ireland who go to Northern Ireland study social science, law or business courses. The proportion of students who go to England/Wales to study creative and performing arts is also worth noting. It is not possible to directly compare the fields of study for students attending Irish HEIs due to differences in the classification used. However, HEA

data for 2020/21 (undergraduate and postgraduate combined) suggest that students from Ireland in the UK are overrepresented in medical-related fields compared to the pattern in Irish HEIs.

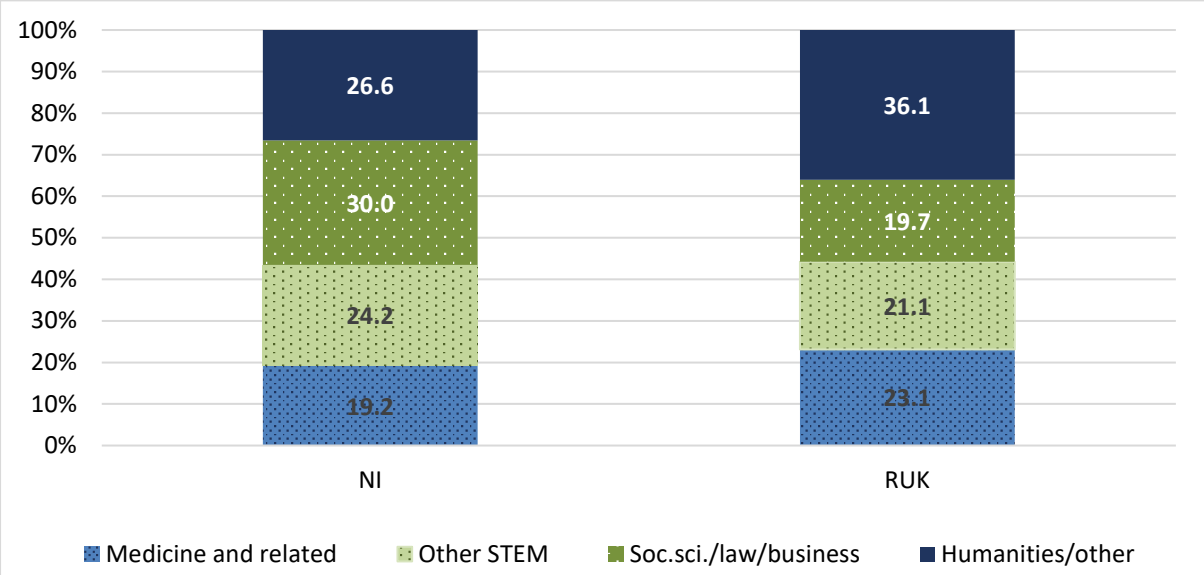
FIGURE 3.4 STUDENTS FROM IRELAND IN UK HEIS BY FIELD OF STUDY, 2020/21



Source: HEA, reported in HEA (2022).
Note: Data are rounded to the nearest five.

In comparison, students from Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK studying in Irish HEIs tend to be spread across fields of study, with British students more likely than those from Northern Ireland to be studying humanities courses and those from Northern Ireland more likely to be studying social science/law/business (Figure 3.5).

FIGURE 3.5 STUDENTS FROM NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE REST OF THE UK IN IRISH HEIS BY FIELD OF STUDY, 2020/21



Source: HESA.
Note: HESA data are rounded to the nearest five.

The number of Northern Ireland students in HEIs in Ireland is too small to break down by detailed institution attended. However, Section 3.3 provides information on the extent to which applications from Northern Ireland students are concentrated in areas close to the border and in Dublin. Information from HESA allows us to examine whether students from Ireland are concentrated in particular HEIs in England/Wales and Scotland. In 2021, students from Ireland were somewhat more likely to attend Ulster University than Queen's University Belfast, with a similar distribution also evident in 2014/15. Table 3.2 shows the HEIs in England and Scotland that were attended by 50 or more students from Ireland. There is considerable geographical spread in the institutions attended. Boliver (2015) identifies four clusters of UK universities based on resources, research activity and academic selectivity, with Oxford and Cambridge forming the most élite cluster (1). According to this framework, Irish students tend to go to universities in cluster 3, the largest cluster, though they are quite strongly represented in some cluster 2 universities.

TABLE 3.2 MAIN HEIS IN ENGLAND AND SCOTLAND ATTENDED BY STUDENTS FROM IRELAND, 2020/21, IDENTIFYING THOSE WITH 50 OR MORE

England	Scotland
Coventry University (3)	Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh (3)
Anglia Ruskin University (4)	Robert Gordon University (3)
Liverpool John Moores University (3)	The University of Stirling (3)
The University of Sunderland (3)	Edinburgh Napier University (3)
University of Bedfordshire (3)	The University of Edinburgh (2)
The University of Brighton (3)	The University of Dundee (3)
The University of Essex (3)	Glasgow Caledonian University (2)
Kingston University (3)	The University of Glasgow (3)
The University of Birmingham (2)	
King's College London (2)	
The University of Salford (3)	
The University of Southampton (2)	

Source: HESA data. Cluster membership in parentheses based on Boliver (2015).
Note: The numbers in parentheses refer to the cluster ranking of the institution, with 1 indicating the highest.

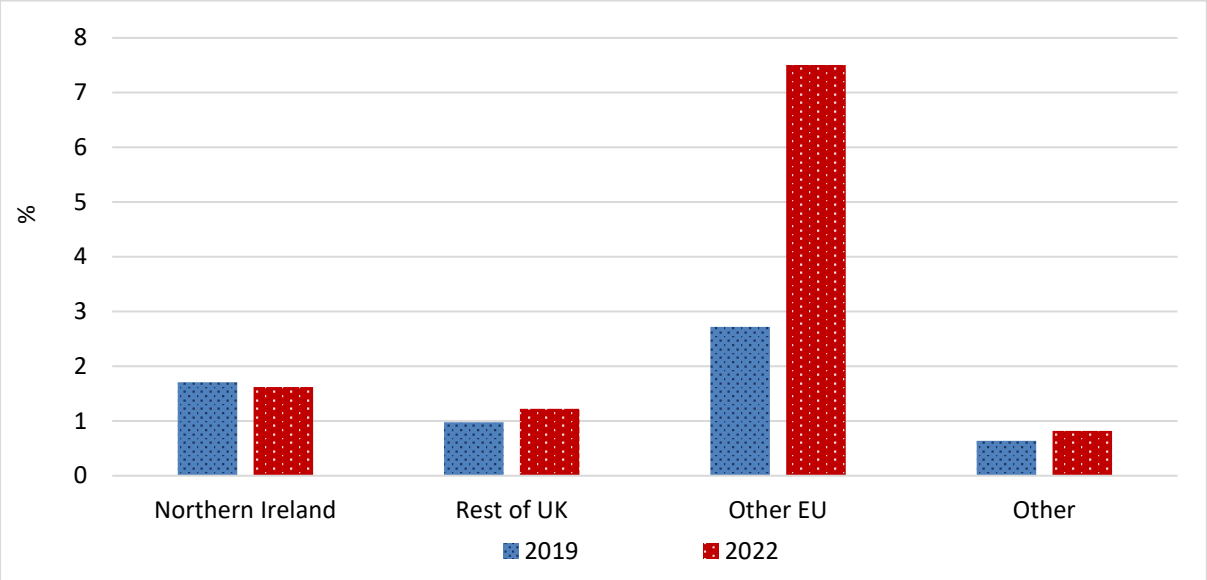
3.3 APPLICATIONS AND ACCEPTANCES TO HEIS IN IRELAND

3.3.1 Applications

The analyses in this section focus on two time-points: 2019, just before the pandemic, and 2022, the most recent period for which data are available. The total number of applicants in datasets analysed increased over that period from almost 75,000 to just over 80,000. The proportion of applicants coming from Northern Ireland or the rest of the UK was relatively stable but there was a marked increase in the proportion coming from other EU countries[13] (Figure 3.6).

[13] Available information does not allow us to determine whether the increase is from a particular country or group of countries.

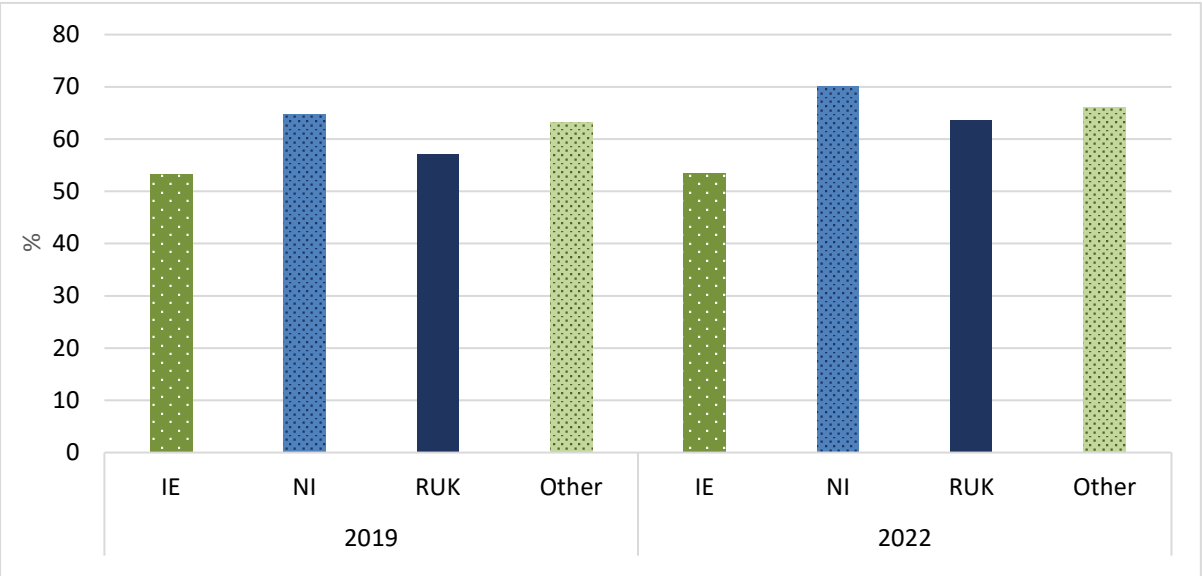
FIGURE 3.6 COUNTRY OF ORIGIN OF CAO APPLICANTS, 2019 AND 2022



Source: CAO microdata.

The analyses indicate differences in applicant characteristics by country of origin. Candidates from Northern Ireland and RUK are more likely to be female than candidates from Ireland (Figure 3.7). The proportion female was slightly higher in 2022 than in 2019. Applicants from elsewhere (rest of Europe or the rest of the world) are also disproportionately female.

FIGURE 3.7 PROPORTION OF APPLICANTS WHO ARE FEMALE BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, 2019 AND 2022



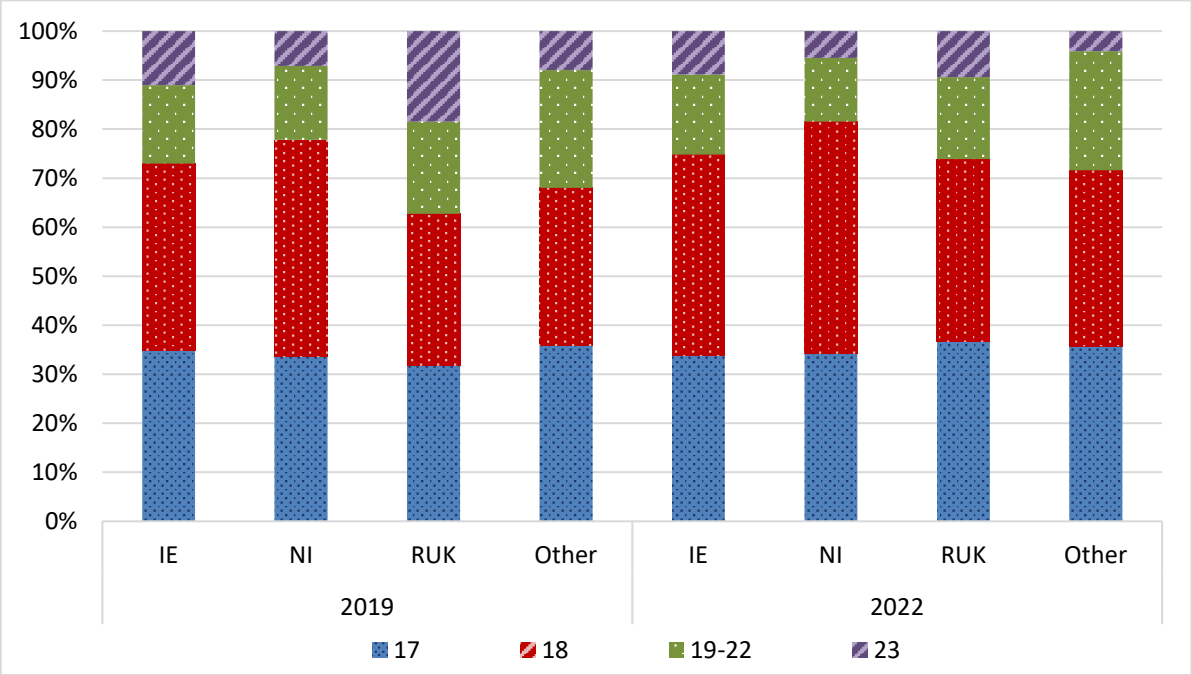
Source: CAO microdata.

Differences are also evident in the age profile of applicants. Candidates from Northern Ireland tend to be younger than those from Ireland (Figure 3.8). In 2019,

78 per cent of NI candidates were aged 18 or under (in the January of the application year) compared to 73 per cent of IE candidates. The proportions were 82 per cent and 75 per cent respectively in 2022. In contrast, applicants from the rest of the UK tended to be older, though there were fewer aged 23 and over in 2022 than in 2019. Candidates from elsewhere are closer to the profile of the RUK group than to those from Ireland or Northern Ireland.

Candidates can apply for Level 6/7 and Level 8 courses through the CAO process.[14] In 2022, the vast majority of applicants across all countries had applied for at least one Level 8 course. However, Irish applicants were more likely to apply for a longer list of courses (an average of 6.1 compared with 5.8 for NI and 4.7 for RUK). Between-country differences were more evident in relation to Level 6/7 courses, with over half of Irish applicants applying for at least one such course compared with 24 per cent of those from Northern Ireland and only 7 per cent of those from the rest of the UK.

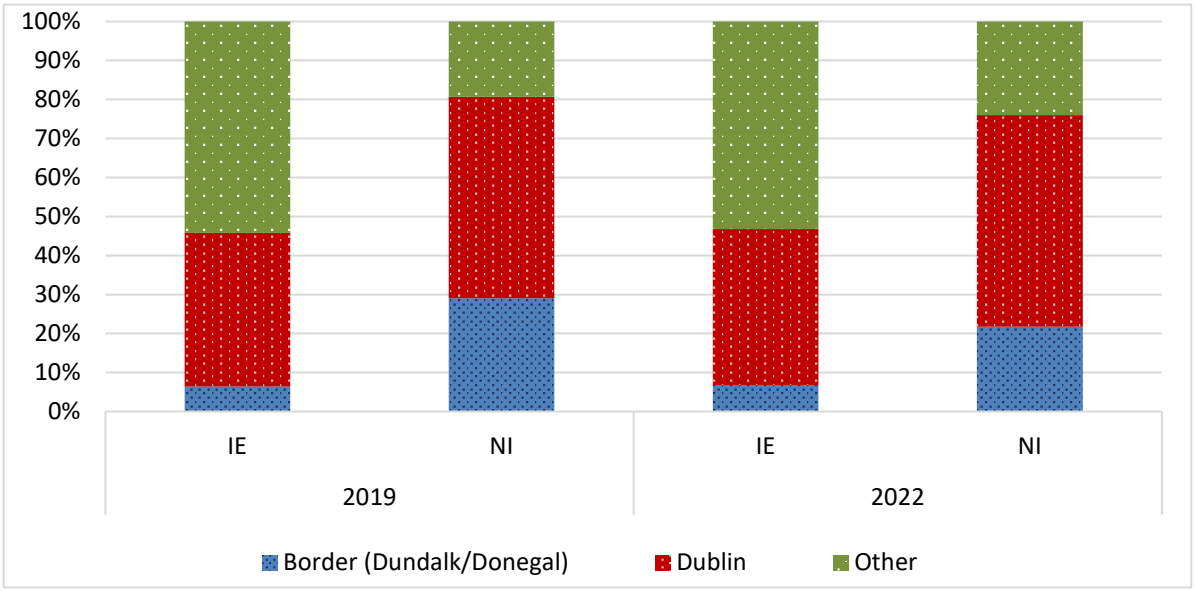
FIGURE 3.8 AGE PROFILE OF APPLICANTS BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, 2019 AND 2022



Source: CAO microdata.

[14] A Level 6 qualification is known as a Higher Certificate and is usually two years in duration. A Level 7 is known as an ordinary degree, generally three years in duration. A Level 8 is known as an honours degree, generally four years in duration, with some exceptions.

FIGURE 3.9 LOCATION OF PREFERRED COURSE BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, 2019 AND 2022



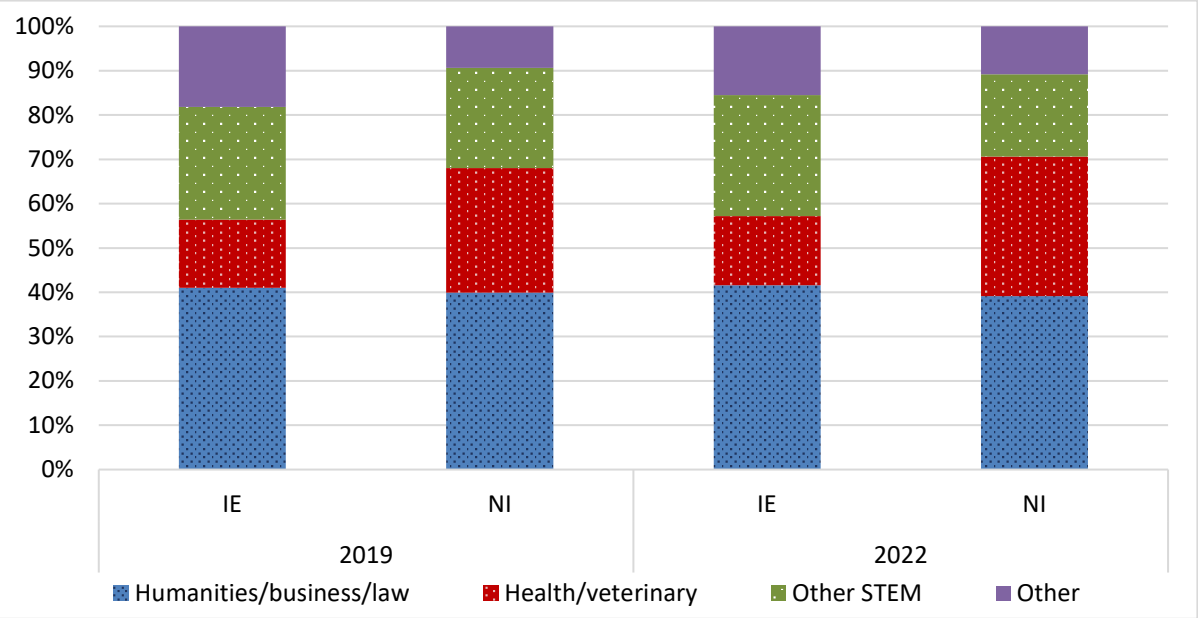
Source: CAO microdata.

The most striking differences between candidates from Ireland and Northern Ireland relate to the location and the field of the selected courses.[15] Applicants from Northern Ireland are much more likely to apply for a course in an institution located near the border (Louth or Donegal) or in Dublin (Figure 3.9). In 2019, 29 per cent of those from NI applied for a HEI in the border area compared with 6 per cent for candidates from IE. In 2022, 54 per cent from NI applied for a place in Dublin compared with 40 per cent of those from Ireland. Indeed, applicants from other countries were all more likely to choose a Dublin-based HEI – 83 per cent for those from the rest of the UK and 68 per cent of those from the rest of the EU/rest of the world.

In terms of field of study, candidates from Northern Ireland were more likely to select a health/veterinary medicine course than those from Ireland (32 per cent compared with 16 per cent in 2022) (Figure 3.10).

15 Figures for the rest of the UK and elsewhere are not included here because of small cell sizes.

FIGURE 3.10 FIELD OF STUDY OF PREFERRED COURSE BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, 2019 AND 2022



Source: CAO microdata.

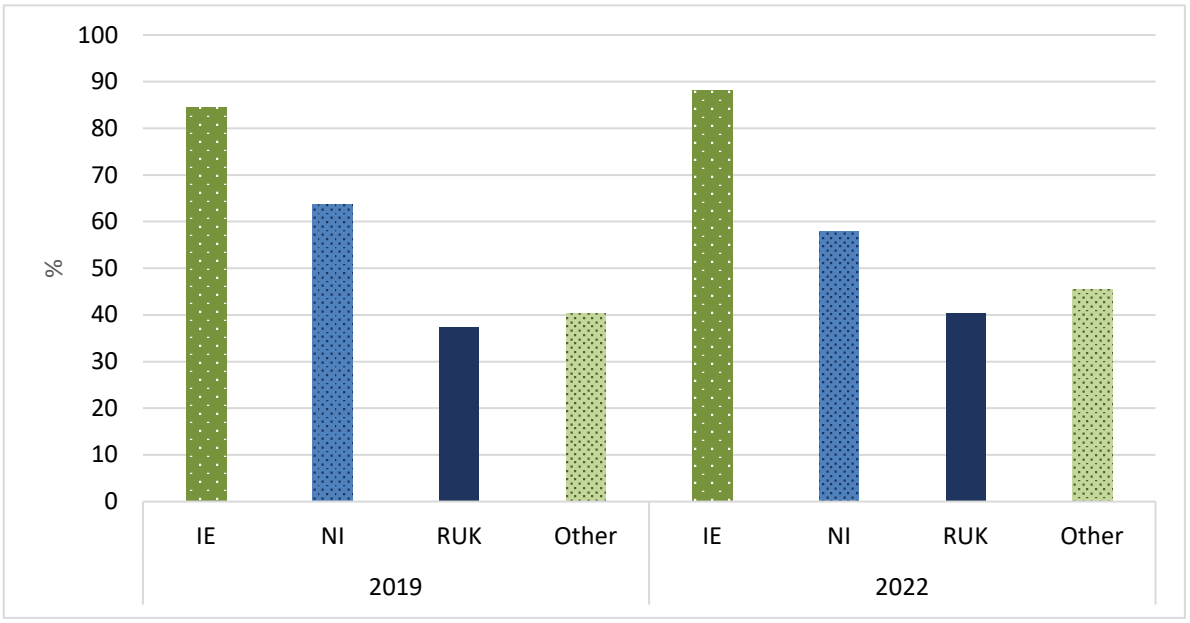
3.3.2 Offers and acceptances

Receiving an offer of a place through the CAO process reflects a number of processes: meeting the minimum matriculation requirements for a course (for example, having studied a particular subject and/or achieved a particular grade in that subject), the number of places available, the candidate's final grades (in the Leaving Certificate, A-levels or equivalent) and the candidate's achievement profile relative to other applicants for the same course.

Figure 3.11 shows that the vast majority of applicants from Ireland received at least one course offer – 85 per cent in 2019 and 88 per cent in 2022. The proportion receiving an offer among those from Northern Ireland was much lower (64 per cent in 2019 and 58 per cent in 2022), and lower again for those from the rest of the UK (37 per cent in 2019 and 45 per cent in 2022). The rates for the rest of the UK were lower than those among candidates from the rest of Europe/world (40 per cent in 2019 and 45 per cent in 2022).

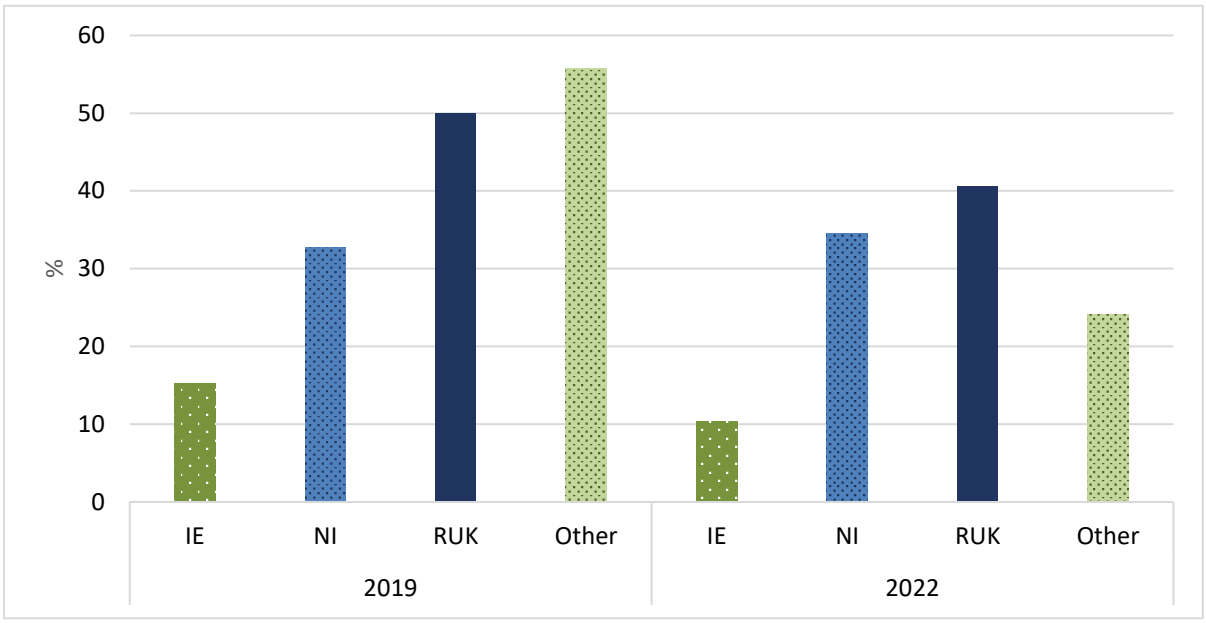
At least part of this difference was explained by variation in the proportion meeting minimum matriculation requirements (such as having studied a modern language) for the preferred course. This was the case for a tenth of candidates from Ireland in 2022 but around a third of candidates from Northern Ireland did not meet requirements in both 2019 and 2022. Those from the rest of the UK were less likely to meet requirements than those from Northern Ireland. This could be explained by differences in the entry systems across jurisdictions and/or by variation in awareness of course requirements.

FIGURE 3.11 PROPORTION WHO RECEIVED ONE OR MORE OFFER BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, 2019 AND 2022



Source: CAO microdata.

FIGURE 3.12 PROPORTION NOT MEETING MINIMUM MATRICULATION REQUIREMENTS BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, 2019 AND 2022



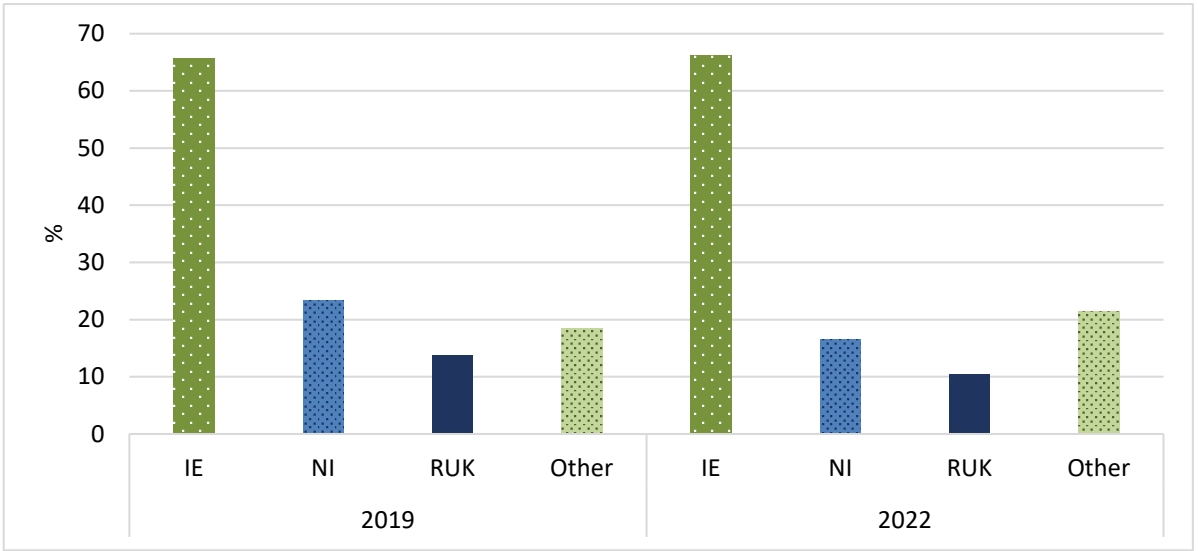
Source: CAO microdata.

Not surprisingly, performance levels were higher among those who received a course offer than those who did not. In 2019, there was a gap in points between successful candidates of 150 points. In 2022, the gap was 142 points.

Among candidates from Northern Ireland, those who received an offer tended to have more A-levels than those who did not. In 2019, 45 per cent of those with one A-level received an offer compared with 75 per cent of those with three A-levels and 78 per cent of those with four or more A-levels.

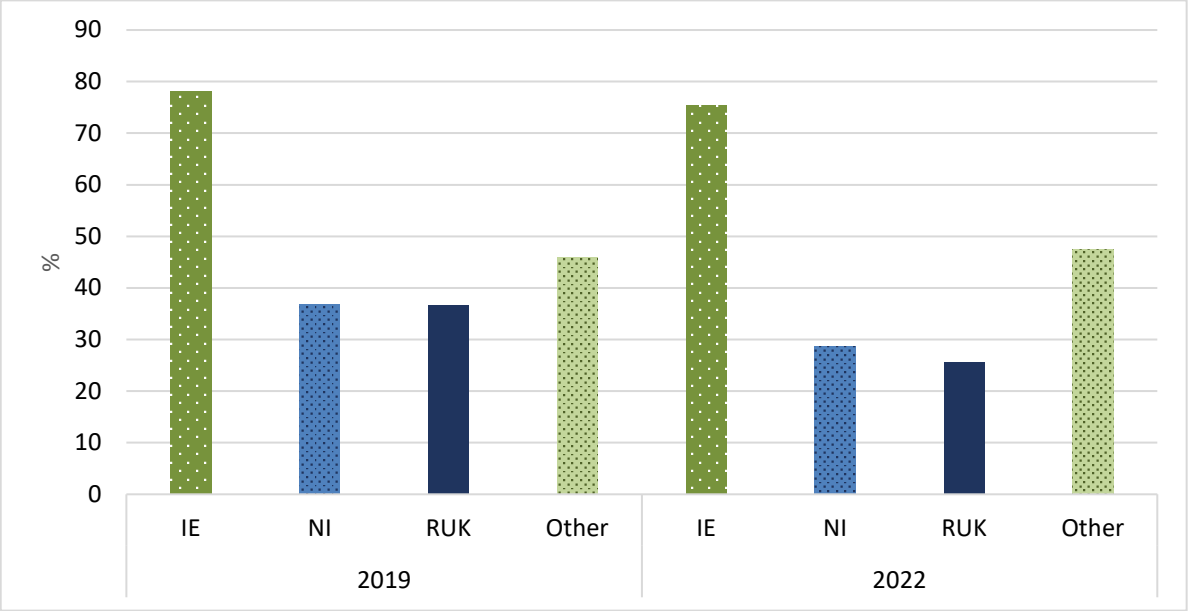
Of course, receiving an offer did not mean that candidates accepted it. Figures 3.13 and 3.14 show the proportion of all applicants who accepted a place and the proportion of those who accepted an offer among the smaller group who received any offer. The majority – around two-thirds – of candidates from Ireland make it all the way through the process from application to acceptance. However, this applies to only a minority of candidates from elsewhere and the rate declines for NI and RUK candidates from 2019 to 2022. This pattern reflects, at least in part, the fact that applicants from Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK are less likely to receive an offer of a place in an Irish HEI (Figure 3.13). However, even among candidates receiving an offer, acceptance rates are much lower. In 2019, over three-quarters (78 per cent) of candidates from Ireland accepted an offer compared to 37 per cent for Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. Acceptance rates were even lower in 2022, at 29 per cent in Northern Ireland and 26 per cent for the rest of the UK group. Section 3.4 will place these patterns in context by looking at patterns of application and acceptance of students from Northern Ireland to universities in the jurisdiction and in the rest of the UK.

FIGURE 3.13 ACCEPTING A PLACE IN IRISH HEIS AS A PROPORTION OF ALL APPLICANTS BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, 2019 AND 2022



Source: CAO microdata.

FIGURE 3.14 ACCEPTING A PLACE AS A PROPORTION OF THOSE WHO WERE OFFERED A PLACE, 2019 AND 2022



Source: CAO microdata.

3.4 APPLICATIONS AND ACCEPTANCES TO HEIS IN THE UK

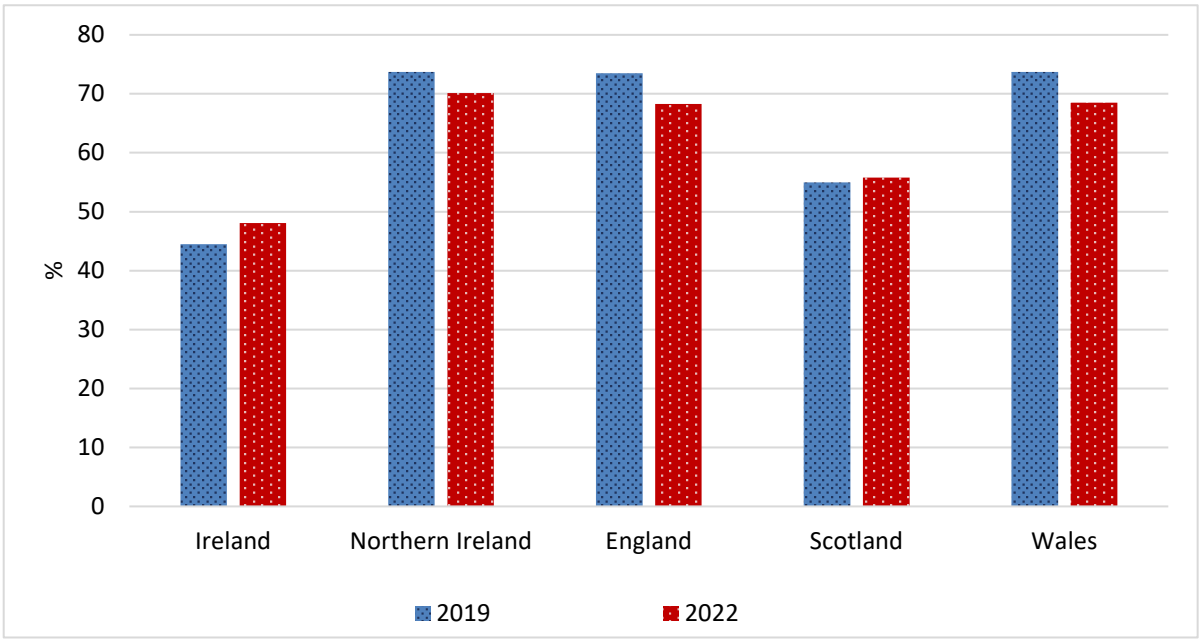
UCAS data can be used to explore patterns of applications and acceptances from Ireland and Northern Ireland. To mirror the CAO information, the analyses focus on 2019 and 2022. The data show over 16,000 applicants from Ireland to UK universities (including Northern Ireland) in 2019, with an increase to almost 23,000 in 2022 (Table 3.3). There was also an increase, but a smaller one, in the number of Northern Ireland applicants to UK universities (including universities based in Northern Ireland). The majority of applicants in Northern Ireland, England and Wales received an offer, with offer rates in Northern Ireland on a par with those in England (Figure 3.15). Offer rates were somewhat lower for Scotland, at just over half, and lower again for Irish applicants (45 per cent in 2019 and 48 per cent in 2022).

TABLE 3.3 UCAS APPLICATIONS AND OFFERS BY COUNTRY, 2019 AND 2022 (MAIN SCHEME APPLICATIONS ONLY)

	Applications	Offers
2019		
Ireland	16,065	7,145
Northern Ireland	82,285	60,605
England	1,797,510	1,321,210
Scotland	188,835	103,825
Wales	85,300	62,865
2022		
Ireland	22,740	10,940
Northern Ireland	83,620	58,645
England	2,061,975	1,407,510
Scotland	201,255	112,320
Wales	97,880	67,020

Source: UCAS data.
Note: UCAS data exclude some higher education courses in Scotland run through further education colleges.

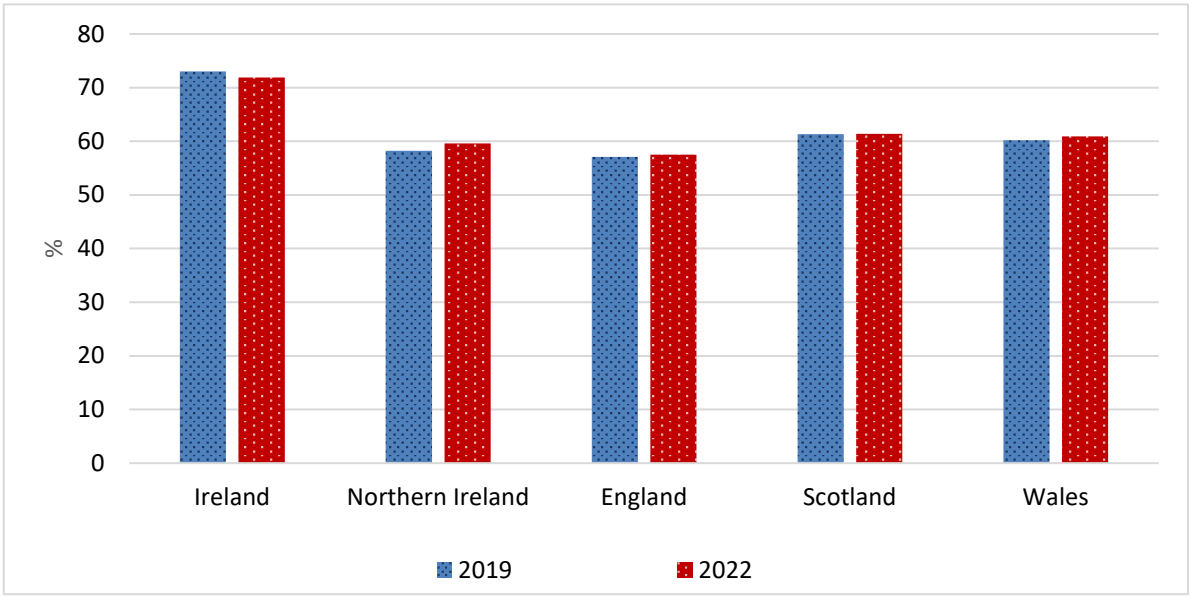
FIGURE 3.15 UCAS OFFER RATE BY COUNTRY, 2019 AND 2022



Source: UCAS data.

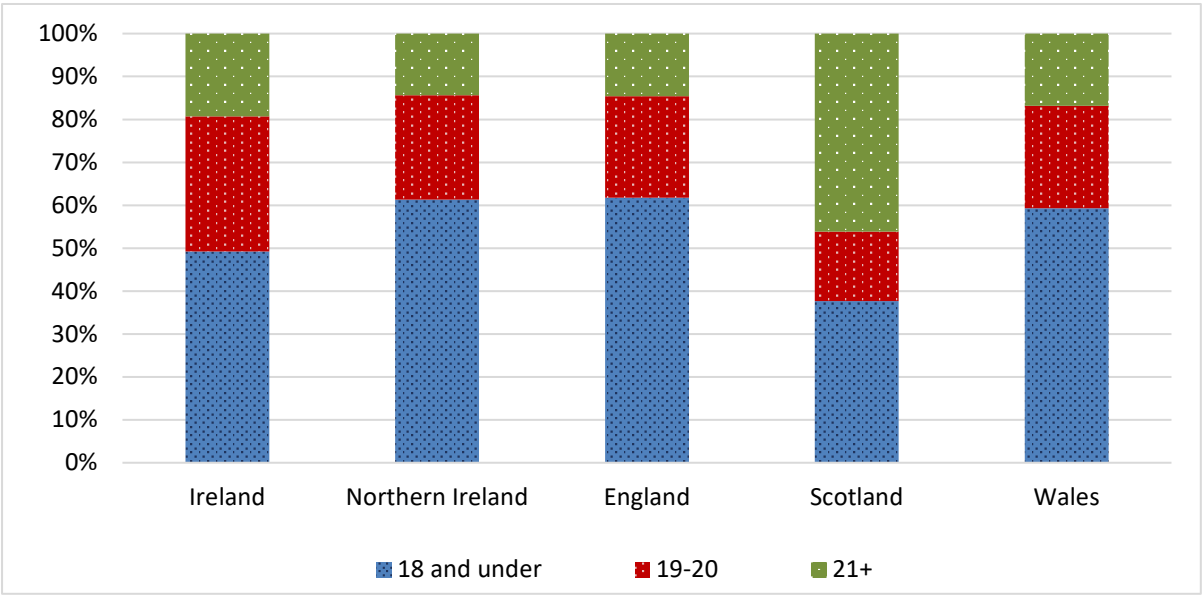
Females make up the majority of applicants across all of the jurisdictions (Figure 3.16), though females are more strongly overrepresented among applicants from Ireland – around 70 per cent compared to around 60 per cent for Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

FIGURE 3.16 PROPORTION OF APPLICANTS TO UK HEIS WHO ARE FEMALE BY COUNTRY, 2019 AND 2022



Source: UCAS data.

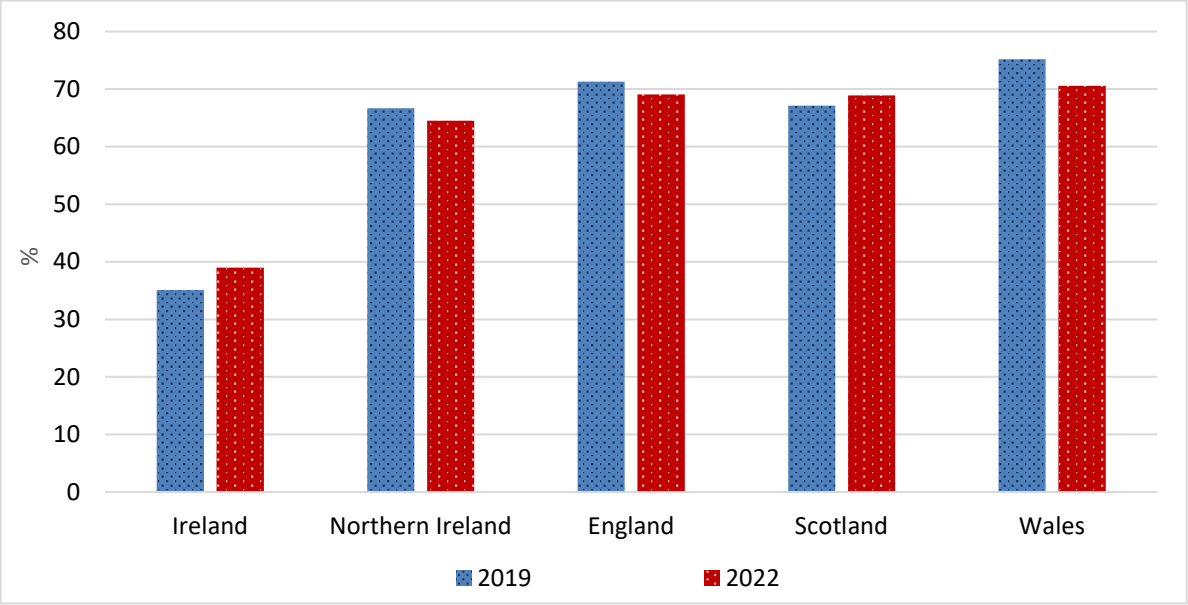
FIGURE 3.17 AGE DISTRIBUTION APPLICANTS TO UK HEIS BY COUNTRY, 2019



Source: UCAS data.

Applicants from Ireland are more likely to fall into the 19 to 20 age group than those from Northern Ireland (31 per cent compared with 24 per cent) (Figure 3.17). The age profile of applicants from Northern Ireland is broadly similar to that for England and Wales, with candidates from Scotland being older.

FIGURE 3.18 ACCEPTANCE RATE TO UK HEIS BY COUNTRY, 2019 AND 2022

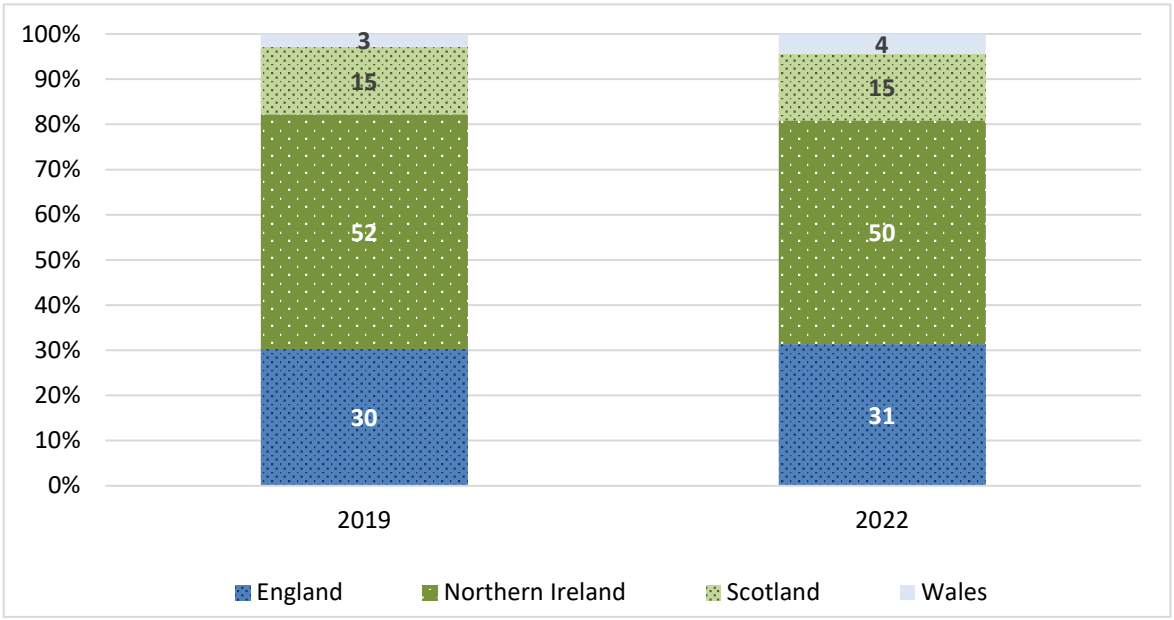


Source: UCAS data.
Note: The acceptance rate used by UCAS is the total number of accepted students divided by the total number of applications.

Figure 3.18 shows acceptance rates by country for 2019 and 2022. Acceptance rates for Irish applicants are much lower than for the countries of the UK – just over a third compared with around two-thirds of those from the UK being successful.

The analyses so far have examined applicants by country of domicile but not by country of destination. Unfortunately, available UCAS data do not allow us to distinguish between applicants from Ireland and those from other EU countries. However, we can examine the extent to which applicants from Northern Ireland apply for places in the rest of the UK (and vice versa). Figure 3.19 shows that around half of the applicants from Northern Ireland apply for a place in another part of the UK, most commonly in England. Figure 3.20 shows that the outflow of applications from Northern Ireland is not matched by inflow from the rest of the UK. Over four-fifths of UK applicants for higher education institutions in Northern Ireland come from Northern Ireland. Only around 1 per cent of candidates come from Scotland, although Scotland represents a preferred location for one-in-six of applicants from Northern Ireland.

FIGURE 3.19 DESTINATION LOCATION FOR APPLICANTS FROM NORTHERN IRELAND, 2019 AND 2022



Source: UCAS data.

FIGURE 3.20 APPLICANTS TO HEIS IN NORTHERN IRELAND BY COUNTRY OF DOMICILE, 2019 AND 2022

Source: UCAS data.

3.5 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has drawn on administrative data and microdata provided by the CAO to look at the flows of students between Ireland, Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. In 2011/12, the number of students moving from Ireland to Northern

Ireland was larger than those moving in the opposite direction, but subsequent trends meant that numbers were roughly equal by 2020/21. While the numbers moving from Northern Ireland to Ireland have increased somewhat over time, those coming from the rest of the UK have declined somewhat. There is a substantial flow of students from Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK, but relatively little movement in the opposite direction. The numbers from Ireland attending universities in the rest of the UK has remained relatively stable over time.

Analyses of data on applications and acceptances help us to unpack the processes underlying these figures a little more. CAO data show only a small minority of applicants from Northern Ireland or RUK make it all the way through to being offered and accepting a place. This is partly related to these candidates being less likely than those from Ireland to meet minimum matriculation requirements. This could reflect the nature of qualification recognition (see Chapter 2) and/or applicants having less information about course requirements outside the jurisdiction. However, even when offered a place, those from Northern Ireland and RUK are less likely to accept the place. In part, this could be explained by the difference in the timing of receiving course offers in Ireland, Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. Information on field of study suggests that many applicants are using the CAO process to increase the possibility of accessing a high-demand place in a medical-related area. This process is mirrored in looking at Irish applicants to Northern Ireland and RUK, with lower offer and acceptance rates. Overall, female students are more likely to be mobile than their male counterparts relative to their overall enrolment rates. There is a lack of available information on the social background of mobile students. However, on the basis of previous research (see Chapter 1), we would expect these students to be from more advantaged backgrounds. Irish research also points to the greater importance of being able to live in the parental home and of good transport links in choice of educational institution among more disadvantaged students (Smyth and Murphy, 2018).

CHAPTER 4

Stakeholder perspectives on student mobility

4.1 INTRODUCTION

As discussed in Chapter 1 of the report, student mobility is seen as an important policy issue in many countries, particularly in the context of the internationalisation of higher education (Beech, 2019). This chapter aims to summarise the perspectives of stakeholders on student mobility between Ireland, Northern Ireland and Great Britain. In order to capture a variety of views, the stakeholders invited to participate in this study include policymakers, academics and personnel from university administration. In total, 13 semi-structured interviews (with 14 interviewees) were conducted across the jurisdictions. For the interviews, the focus of the discussion was modified to reflect the background of the interviewee. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed, using a thematic analysis approach. The aim of this approach is to identify topics that emerged most frequently. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, the quotes used by the stakeholders only refer to their jurisdiction. The one-on-one interviews with stakeholders were complemented by an online consultation event to explore the main issues highlighted by the interviews in greater detail. The event was attended by 21 individuals. The chapter highlights the benefits of student mobility to students themselves, but also to the jurisdictions more broadly. It also discusses the challenges faced by the two jurisdictions as well as individual students.

4.2 INTERVIEWS WITH STAKEHOLDERS

4.2.1 Benefits of student mobility

Chapter 1 of this report outlined the various benefits that accrue to a student when undertaking study abroad. The interviews conducted with stakeholders for this study highlighted the benefits of studying abroad. In addition to acquiring academic skills, students were also seen to benefit from other experiences:

> *It's also … the transferable skills they get…. The teamwork in an international context, problem solving, independence. All these kind of skills that they will really hone when they were abroad and they do, they [are] utterly transformed when they come back.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

Student mobility and related networking are also beneficial for the jurisdictions, especially the higher education sector.

> *It's about strengthening the relationships between the institutions…. It's not so much that we're competing with each other, [so] that we're*

> *maximising the resources on the island to ensure that opportunities exist for students North and South on the island of Ireland.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

Student mobility was also seen as strengthening cohesion across the island of Ireland, by providing opportunities for students to gain a better understanding of the context of another jurisdiction:

> *For all our students who have gone [to study in NI] very, very few have previously been to Northern Ireland and that's a key point. You know, they had no experience of Northern Ireland. They had no understanding of it, of the complexity of the Northern political situation.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

Similar points were made by stakeholders in the consultation group, who felt that in addition to exposure to a new learning environment in another jurisdiction, students benefit from this experience in a number of different ways, including developing better understanding of a different cultural context, essential for promoting social cohesion across the island of Ireland:

> *We need to start looking at how can we improve things. And the reason for doing this is to increase understanding, you know, between communities. Enhancing the experience of the person who's availing of the mobility, whether that's the short term or whether that's actually somebody doing a postgrad study or whatever, just opening up their eyes, was the expression that [was] being looked at. That's not just about academic growth. It's also about personal growth and personal understanding and cultural. There's a huge soft benefit… an appreciation for diversity … an appreciation and a respect, tolerance for everybody and I think that's really, really essential in this shared island vision that we have that both North and South that goes both ways.* (Stakeholder consultation group)

4.2.2 Pull factors and factors facilitating student mobility

Decisions to study abroad can be related to a number of different factors. A number of 'pull factors' influence the choice to study abroad. Research has shown that for Irish students who have decided to opt for a HEI in the UK, the decision is often related to family / friends living or studying in the country (British Council, 2022b). Furthermore, study in the UK was seen to offer a broader variety of course options as well as being easy to travel to, and providing students with exposure to new people and places (ibid). The study also indicated that Brexit has had little impact on students' perceptions of the UK as a study destination, mainly because fees for students from Ireland have been (largely) unaffected.

Previous research has indicated that students who are exposed to mobility either through family or friends are more likely to consider studying abroad (Findlay and King, 2010; Souto-Otero and McCoshan, 2006). In the same vein, the stakeholders in this study noted that student decision-making can be influenced by their families and peer networks:

> *And [if] I had a friend who went here or my sister and brother went here… so if they've had someone else's gone here, they are more likely to [study abroad].* (Stakeholder, UK).

> *Family and friends are huge influencers. So it could be that they know somebody who's already gone to that university, or they know somebody who's already there or they've got family in the area, you know, just as a support network.* (Stakeholder, NI)

Awareness of possibilities to study abroad expands the choice set available to students:

> *I also think there is a piece around student choice, you know, expanding choice for students is always a good thing. If there are better choices, and I think particularly if there are programmes [not] in one jurisdiction [but] in another, that's I think where we could do more around … identifying or letting students know that … there's something in [another jurisdiction] that's not here, that I think makes for a better ecosystem than we have currently.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

Some students may wish to opt for a HEI that has specific characteristics that they prefer. For example, some may prefer smaller institutions that provide students with a more personalised learning experience:

> *I think because [the HEI] is quite small, it's quite a personalised experience. I think that's one of the main selling points. It is a very close knit community. They want to be in small classes and have a lot of one-on-one time with the lecturers and tutors. I think that's a real advantage. There's very few classes that have got large numbers and then that would just not be elsewhere. It'd be like a few hundred in a lecture [hall].* (Stakeholder, UK)

In addition to the characteristics of the HEIs, students look for institutions that provide specific courses:

> *I think also with the course portfolio, Health Sciences is probably what [the HEI] is most known for. We've got a lot of Physiotherapy, for*

> *example. Very popular, and Paramedic Science … which is huge.* (Stakeholder, UK)

In order to attract students, HEIs are increasingly providing information online, assisting students in making more informed decisions:

> *More information is online that the pupils have access to 24/7… now [with a] touch of a button, all the information's there, virtual tours, blogs, etc., with students who are already there… the universities are very, very good at promoting themselves online.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

4.2.3 Factors constraining student mobility

The interviews conducted with the stakeholders showed that various barriers exist that hinder mobility between the jurisdictions.

Systemic challenges

At a meso-level, awareness of options to study abroad was highlighted by a number of interviewees. Information received from guidance counsellors and assistance with the application process were seen by stakeholders as raising awareness and promoting mobility:

> *Face to face guidance, counsellors having knowledge … in the South having knowledge of the North is something that … and maybe of GB as well, as something that would be most important in … making students aware. How do you apply and the grant system and so on. But the awareness piece, we felt that the guidance counsellors were the key stakeholders that … we needed to engage with.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

The stakeholders from Ireland and Northern Ireland noted that there seems to be a lack of awareness among the guidance counsellors or careers teachers in schools:

> *Very often students aren't even made aware of [study abroad]...[if] it's not part of the ethos of a programme…. I think in terms of whether students actually are aware of options, … a lack of awareness … lack of knowledge … is a big one. Just lack of … promotion, lack of understanding of what it's about.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

Lack of promotion of Ireland as a destination by careers advisors in Northern Ireland was also cited as a challenge to cross-border mobility by the stakeholder consultation group.

While the stakeholders mentioned different outreach activities used to promote their HEIs, several interviewees highlighted a lack of awareness and promotion of cross-border mobility:

> *There seems to be a lack of promotion on both sides for students to come to the North, but also for students from the North to go to the South.* (Stakeholder, NI)

> *Awareness among guidance counsellors in schools in Northern Ireland is very low. The students aren't actually even presented, sometimes with the options. Maybe it is ideological, but more so I'd say just practical that they have, they have their portfolio of options and … I think that's that.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

However, awareness seems to be higher among guidance counsellors in schools in the border counties, reflecting greater interest among students in the opportunities across the border:

> *The guidance counsellors in the border counties who, generally speaking, spend more time... They would have more interest in the courses that are available in Northern Ireland … Learning about how to make a UCAS application … But generally speaking, the demand in the other counties is not as great as around the border counties.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

Previous research that focussed on the reasons for Irish students moving to UK to study showed that the factors shaping students' decisions include uncertainty relating to the CAO points systems, availability of certain courses as well as the costs/availability of student accommodation (British Council, 2022b). A number of stakeholders in this study commented on the differences between the education systems in Ireland and Northern Ireland. In particular, the timing of offers in Ireland and Northern Ireland was seen to disadvantage some students in the past:[16]

> *The barrier, which is a really significant one, and it burnt us massively last year and actually disadvantaged home students that I otherwise could have given places to, is how late the Irish Leaving Certs have become. [Waiting for too long for the results to come out] can't be good for their start at university, regardless of where they go. You know, there's no accommodation left. There's no time to prepare. It must be just a last minute dash in order to get in and to get started.* (Stakeholder, NI)

[16] The State Examinations Commission (SEC) intends to issue the 2023 Leaving Certificate and Leaving Certificate Applied examination results to candidates on Friday 25 August 2023.

> *The difference between timing of UCAS and CAO and the process in both. … CAO was problematic for students in the South. They have an offer in the North or in GB before they even have an offer here, so [that causes] all kinds of other issues. Leaving [Certificate results] should come out as it used to [mid-August]. That would certainly alleviate the issue, because then then you'd have students with their data and their points earlier and have a sense of what … their possibilities are earlier.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

> *And … the other issue we have then is the lateness of the Leaving Certificate results at the minute, [it is] extremely challenging, particularly where we've got those capped places. Like those commissioned ones that I have mentioned where … if the Leaving Certificate people meet the conditions of their offer, we're bound to give them that place. So we can't give it to the people … from Northern Ireland because we have to hold it until we see what's happening with those. So … there's a a kind of long wait for those people* (Stakeholder, NI)

Bringing the Leaving Certificate results forward to 25 August in 2023[17] is likely to address many of the concerns raised by the stakeholders who were interviewed prior to the announcement. In addition to the timing of the offers that was commented on by many stakeholders as a barrier to mobility, qualification recognition was also highlighted as restricting the options available to students.

> *And one of the the issues that's constantly emerging … during those discussions is how you treat the A-levels…. where this really emerges is in high value courses. Up North, they don't take four A-levels. They take three A-levels and therefore they are immediately restricted because they can't get to the 600 threshold.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

> *One of the big issues is the equivalencies. When 20 years ago, the new equivalencies were created and they were premised on the assumption that it got 600 points. You had to be doing four A-levels, which is a tiny fraction of the students in the North. And that really was a massive hindrance to mobility from North to South.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

According to one stakeholder, students from Ireland going to study in Northern Ireland find it easier to get their qualifications recognised:

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17 The results were issued on 2 September in 2022.

> *Universities here in Northern Ireland are quite generous in terms of how we recognise the equivalence of Irish Leaving Cert to A-level. I don't believe that the corollary is happening. I'm really struck by how hard it is for our best and brightest students to get places in the likes of [2 HEIs in Ireland]. It's much, much harder for our students to go South than it is for your students to come here, which is why we have huge demand in the initial part.* (Stakeholder, NI)

Difficulties in qualification recognition were seen as influencing student mobility from Northern Ireland to Ireland, with students likely to opt for other destinations:

> *I do think that … because it's harder for our students to have their A-levels recognised in the way that I think they should be down South, that a lot of really good students who might otherwise be minded to go in that direction end up going to England instead.* (Stakeholder, NI)

The challenges associated with qualification recognition are seen to be further compounded by grade inflation in the wake of the pandemic, making it more difficult for some students to meet the requirement for points:

> *The grades inflation that occurred during COVID … and now suddenly … it's not just 600 points, it's 625.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

International research indicates that increases in student fees may act as a disincentive to cross-border student mobility (Wakeling and Jefferies, 2013). In the same vein, the interviews with stakeholders suggested that the introduction of fees in Northern Ireland had a negative effect on student mobility: 'The North introduced a fee and the South abolished theirs and that damaged mobility in both directions' (Stakeholder, Ireland). In addition, the cap on places in Northern Ireland universities was seen as contributing to a 'brain drain':

> *This idea of brain drain has been around the worry that we're losing too many Northern Ireland students… And kind of loss of students out of our region …. only Scotland does better at retaining them for very obvious reasons related to tuition fees.* (Stakeholder, NI)

Cost of living and personal circumstances

In addition to systemic factors, student mobility is also influenced by other factors such as the cost of living (Teichler, 2009; Whittaker, 2014; Souto-Otero et al., 2013). Several stakeholders highlighted the impact of the cost of living on students' selection of a HEI. According to one interviewee, the impact of costs may result in students opting for HEIs closer to home, and, hence, a more localised student experience:

> *We find more and more of the students are now going to their local university because of accommodation and other costs. The risk is that … the university experience [is becoming] more localised and that will obviously affect mobility as well.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

Several stakeholders highlighted the shortage and affordability of accommodation that affects both domestic and international students: 'I mean, accommodation … has been a huge issue'. (Stakeholder, Ireland)

> *The accommodation issue is … the big issue, you know, … the elephant in the room … it's much bigger than just international students. It is looking after Irish students as well.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

> *Availability of accommodation more than anything. And I'm sure cost is a big factor. But even if they had the money, is there, is there accommodation available? And so that that has come up a few times, especially people coming from further afield. Equally between Northern Ireland and other parts of Republic of Ireland, it's very hard for people to be able to move away from home.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

Accommodation as a challenge was also highlighted by the stakeholder consultation group, particularly with reference to Ireland where the cost of living is perceived to be higher compared to Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK:

> *The biggest barrier seen is accommodation in the South seems to have been a real problem. Lack of accommodation for students coming inward is a real issue. … Also the perceived expense of living in the South was mentioned quite a lot. … the UK was seen as cheaper and it was mentioned that Northern Ireland is the cheapest place in the UK in terms of cost of living, accommodation and so on and that other UK destinations may also be cheaper.* (Stakeholder consultation group)

In addition to the costs associated with moving into higher education, some stakeholders highlighted factors such as family and other ties, that may act as barriers to student mobility:

> *Family commitments, family ties and that's a big factor. Time in people's lives … it may not be the right time for … all kinds of reasons … for mature students, they may have family commitments.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

> *You wouldn't get that many people looking at Britain or Northern Ireland, because … they're tied down with family commitments and they wouldn't be able to travel.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

> *Another commitment we find is sporting associations and affiliations and club membership in Ireland is a big thing. GAA is a big thing. Being member of clubs, societies, they don't want to go and leave that.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

4.2.4 Strengthening cooperation between the jurisdictions

There was a general consensus among stakeholders that student mobility between the jurisdictions, and particularly between Ireland and Northern Ireland, should be enhanced. Increased cooperation would enable a maximisation of resources across the island of Ireland to provide more choice for students and enrich student experience:

> *It's not just about education. It's about strengthening the relationships between the institutions…. It's not so much that we're competing with each other, but that we're maximising the resources on the island to ensure that opportunities exist for students North and South on the island of Ireland. Higher education … is expensive and is resource demanding, let's make sure that we're maximising the resources on the island to deliver that.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

> *Cross-border education is what creates shared understanding, shared communities. And then secondly, diversity in the classroom and I think the more diverse your student population is the better, the more dynamic the classroom is, the better the experiences and the different perspectives.* (Stakeholder, Ireland)

While some students move abroad because of push factors such as capacity issues on some courses (Stakeholder, Ireland), other students – the 'determined leavers' – wish to broaden their horizons and experience a different learning environment:

> *They want to go somewhere else. It's not like they can't get into a Northern Ireland University … I think part of the student is … just experiencing something different.* (Stakeholder, NI)

Student mobility can also be enhanced by availing of a shorter stay in a host institution. For example, the Erasmus programme enables third-level students to study for part of their degree in another EU Member State or undertake a work placement abroad, with their fees and costs paid. The exchanges usually take place

during the second or third year of a course and can last up to 12 months. Brexit had meant the exit of the UK from the Erasmus programme, though the Irish government aims to continue to support students from Northern Ireland for the academic year 2023/24. The UK government has replaced Erasmus with a new Turing scheme, which supports outward (but not inward) flows. The implications of Brexit for short-term student mobility were also highlighted during the consultation event with the stakeholders:

> *Northern Ireland and the UK are out of Erasmus and that creates difficulties for Irish students heading to those jurisdictions because of regulations that are associated with the Erasmus programme. You can only send so many beyond the EU 20% [quota], and even that has to be geographically dispersed. … It's not a fixed element that you can plan year on year.* (Stakeholder consultation group)

However, the stakeholders felt that facilitating cross-border mobility would be relatively easy due to the broad similarity of education systems in Ireland and Northern Ireland, the programmes on offer and the language spoken.

While many stakeholders highlighted challenges regarding cross-border collaboration, some commented on existing links that could be further developed between the HEIs in Ireland and Northern Ireland to strengthen collaboration across the island of Ireland:

> *We speak about challenges all the time, but there are opportunities, you know. The reference was made to, for instance, the potential development in [university in NI] around the postgraduate medical school that's there. And also the practice that existed …, even in the darkest of times, with the troubles and everything like that, there was always a network or a tapestry of collaboration between institutions North and South. Maybe it was based between individuals. Maybe it was based between faculty, but it was there and you know that served as exemplars of just how our education systems can work together.* (Stakeholder consultation group)

In order to ensure cooperation between jurisdictions regarding student mobility and enhancing student experience, sufficient funding of the higher education sector is needed:

> *The universities here in Northern Ireland are beholden to all the same rankings, metrics around kind of investment per head of students and the quality of the student experience, all that stuff. And we are doing it with a much smaller pot of money and it's hard. It's hard to maintain the quality of the student experience and you know, in a constrained*

> *environment and also where you're competing with really good institutions who have more money to throw at it and resource matters, you know absolutely matters.* (Stakeholder, NI)

4.3 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter draws on qualitative interviews with stakeholders and a consultation with policymakers to discuss current mobility patterns, challenges to student mobility and the implications for policy in both jurisdictions. There is a general consensus that student mobility enhances the student experience and helps to promote social cohesion across the island of Ireland. However, students wanting to avail of an option to study abroad face a number of challenges.

Several stakeholders from Ireland and Northern Ireland noted that there should be better awareness of cross-border mobility options. While outreach activities take place in both jurisdictions, guidance counsellors in some schools are not seen as sufficiently aware of the options available and how to support students in applying for a place at a third-level institution abroad. While in border counties guidance counsellors are seen to promote study opportunities across the border, there seems to be less focus on this in other areas.

Additional challenges are posed by differences in the timing of offers. In particular, late release of Leaving Certificate results in Ireland post-pandemic was seen to limit the options available to students. Recognition of qualifications is another barrier to cross-border study mobility, particularly for students from Northern Ireland who may as a result consider opting for HEIs in England, Scotland or Wales.

The increasing cost of living in both jurisdictions is also likely to have an adverse impact on student mobility. Availability and cost of accommodation may force students to consider HEIs closer to home, thus resulting in more limited study options for students and a more localised student experience.

In order to support student mobility and enhance their experiences abroad, institutional structures need to be more aligned regarding the timing of offers and the recognition of qualifications. Adequate funding of the higher education sector would go a long way in putting strong institutional structures in place to support students. Closer collaboration between the two jurisdictions would enable a widening of the options available to students and a maximisation of resources across the island of Ireland.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusions and policy implications

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Student mobility has been attracting increasing attention with the growing globalisation of higher education. Cross-border mobility has been the focus of policy attention, with recent reports by the Royal Irish Academy (2021; 2022) and the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2022) highlighting potential barriers to student movement. The aim of this study is to explore undergraduate mobility (for the whole of the higher education course) between Ireland, Northern Ireland and Britain. In particular, it addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the level of student mobility between Ireland and Northern Ireland (and between NI and the other countries of the UK)? How has this changed over time?
2. What factors are associated with student mobility?
3. To what extent is there potential to increase student mobility across the island? And is this seen as a desirable objective by stakeholders?

This chapter summarises the main findings of the study and discusses the implications for policy and practice, drawing on stakeholder interviews to document the perceived benefits of student mobility for students themselves and for the educational systems more broadly.

5.2 THE LEVEL OF STUDENT MOBILITY

The period 2011/12 to 2020/21 has seen a decline in the number of students domiciled in Ireland who attend HEIs in Northern Ireland, with 1,170 students in this group in 2020/21. Over the same period, there was a slight increase in the number of students from Northern Ireland attending HEIs in Ireland, with the figure reaching 1,255 by 2020/21. The flow from Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK is much greater than the flow to Ireland, with 13,685 moving to universities in Britain in 2020/21. Mobility levels from Ireland to Britain have been lower and stable, at just over 4,000, over time. Scotland has been an important destination for Irish students, at least partly reflecting the fees exemption granted to Irish students before 2020/21.

Overall female students tend to be more mobile than males. Unfortunately, no data are available on the social background of mobile students. International

evidence and Irish evidence on short-term mobility would suggest that they tend to be from more advantaged backgrounds (Whittaker, 2014; Finn and Darmody, 2017; HEA, 2022a). However, further research is needed to explore how mobility decisions on the island of Ireland reflect a family's economic and cultural resources. A substantial proportion of applications outside the jurisdiction are for the highly competitive medical-related courses, indicating the role of availability of places in driving mobility decisions. Geography plays an important role, with students from Northern Ireland more likely to apply for courses in areas close to the Border and in Dublin. In contrast, Irish students moving to Britain have a considerable geographical spread across regions.

Analyses of the pipeline from application to course acceptance indicates that those applying outside their jurisdiction are less likely to meet the minimum course requirements than local candidates and, as a result, are less likely to be offered places. Even when offered places, acceptance rates are lower than for local candidates, suggesting that some applications are a form of safety net if young people cannot access their preferred course locally.

With the exception of small-scale work by British Council (2021b) and Pivotal (2021), there has been little research on the motivations of students in choosing to study elsewhere. Further research would provide useful insights into the decision-making process and how it might vary by gender, social background and location.

5.3 POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO STUDENT MOBILITY

Existing policy documents, interviews with stakeholders and feedback from the consultation event were used to identify potential barriers to student mobility. It was felt that student awareness of options in other jurisdictions was not as great as it might be, with schools nearer the Border more likely to cover UCAS applications as well as the CAO process. Social networks and existing ties were also seen as enhancing British (as opposed to Irish) universities as a perceived option for students from Northern Ireland. The inclusion of Irish-domiciled students in the cap on higher education places in Northern Ireland acts as a potential disincentive to universities in engaging with outreach work with schools in Ireland, though the two universities do carry out such work. In keeping with previous policy reports (such as Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2022), several stakeholders highlighted the issue of qualification recognition as a potential barrier. At present, applicants from Northern Ireland can only achieve the maximum entry points if they take four A-levels, though only a small number (less than 4 per cent) do so. Differences in the take-up of modern foreign languages at GCSE/A-level and Leaving Certificate further impact on the eligibility of some Northern Ireland candidates for certain courses. The timing of course offers has also been identified as a difficulty,

particularly as Leaving Certificate result announcements were delayed in the wake of the pandemic, posing challenges for students who had applied through both the CAO and UCAS systems.

The decision to study outside the jurisdiction involves consideration of a complex range of factors around tuition fees, availability of financial supports, accommodation prices and other living costs. Devolution has resulted in different tuition fees across the UK. As a result, students from Northern Ireland will pay higher fees if they attend a university in Britain and lower (registration) fees if they attend an Irish HEI. Prior to 2020/21, fee exemptions for Irish-domiciled students attending Scottish universities acted as an important driver of mobility patterns but now students from Ireland pay lower fees in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the UK. There is also variation across jurisdictions in the nature and level of financial support for students. Irish students meeting the income criteria for SUSI maintenance grants can avail of such grants in the UK but must apply for UK student loans for tuition fees. Students from Northern Ireland may qualify for a grant to cover registration charges in Ireland but not the SUSI maintenance grant. Those in Northern Ireland (and Wales) can avail of both maintenance grants (depending on income) and maintenance loans. It is difficult to systematically compare the costs of educational participation across jurisdictions. However, analyses of student-accommodation costs in a selection of universities, the main component of expenditure, suggest that young people moving out of Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK or Ireland face higher costs than if they remained locally. Students from Ireland generally face lower accommodation costs by moving elsewhere, though a significant proportion of students have no such costs as they live in the parental home (HEA, 2022a).

5.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The stakeholders interviewed for this study were positive about the value of student mobility in promoting academic and personal development for the students themselves, providing a more diverse learning experience in HEIs, and in helping to foster understanding and trust between the populations of Ireland and Northern Ireland.[18] While outside the parameters of the current study, stakeholders also emphasised the value of short-term mobility in broadening student horizons and cementing collaborative relationships between HEIs. However, the exit of the UK from the Erasmus programme is currently posing challenges to the maintenance of previously established mobility pathways.

[18] There is, however, a lack of systematic evidence on outcomes for mobile students. HEA analyses of non-completion and graduate outcomes distinguish between Irish and all other students, most likely because of the small numbers involved.

The study findings suggest potential for school-based guidance to promote greater awareness of higher education options, course requirements, the application process and available supports across the island. Outreach on the part of HEIs in both jurisdictions will also play an important role in promoting awareness of course options, given research that shows the importance of college open days and HEI websites in educational decision-making (Smyth, 2022). The evidence indicates that Northern Ireland students who do not take four A-levels, the vast majority of the cohort, are placed at a disadvantage, especially in applying for high-points CAO courses. Arguably, inability to meet the language requirements for certain courses may be playing an even stronger role, given very significant disparities in the take-up of modern foreign languages in the two jurisdictions. At the time of writing, a working group has been set up by Universities Ireland[19] to look at the issue and an adjustment of the points equivalences would likely make studying in Ireland a more realistic option for those from Northern Ireland. Although qualification recognition is only one of the potential barriers to mobility, a change in the approach taken might have an important symbolic value in being seen as welcoming to students from Northern Ireland (and the rest of the UK). Differences in the timing of the process, with (conditional and unconditional) offers issued before exam results in Northern Ireland, are less tractable, though the issuing of the Leaving Certificate results in 2023 will move forward to August, creating fewer delays than in previous years.

The decision to study elsewhere involves complex calculations of relative costs in terms of tuition/registration fees, accommodation and living costs. Current accommodation costs and lack of housing availability are undoubtedly barriers to students moving to Irish HEIs from Northern Ireland (and the rest of the UK) as well as creating constraints on HEI choice among Irish-domiciled students (Smyth and Murphy, 2018). While financial supports are in place for students in both jurisdictions (though the level and nature vary), there is a broader issue of the extent to which such supports cover the costs of participation, with Indecon (2022) estimating that only a third of undergraduate living costs are covered by the SUSI grant. In both jurisdictions, there is a broader backdrop regarding the appropriate level and nature of higher education funding about which there is ongoing policy debate. The inclusion of Irish-domiciled applicants in the MASN cap on higher education places in Northern Ireland potentially further fuels competition for places there, and there is a case for revisiting it in the context of seeking to promote cross-border student mobility.

The study findings highlight a number of issues for policy and practice which apply at the national, institutional and, to some extent, school levels. It is evident that

[19] Universities Ireland (UI) was founded in 2003 by the nine university presidents on the island of Ireland to promote and develop cooperation between their institutions.

current levels of cross-border undergraduate mobility are modest in scale, reflecting a multiplicity of factors. Promoting greater mobility is therefore likely to require coordinated interventions across different levels of both systems.

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