

Position Paper on the British Exit from the European Union

Student Response - April 2019





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Proud Members of







A chara,

In 1974 the student movement from Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and the UK came together to forge a united way forward for the student movement. This happened as our island was ravaged by conflict and sectarian strife. At that time the students did what others could not - set aside difference and create a common vision

Brexit now represents the single greatest threat to the future prosperity and stability of our island, and as students, it is imperative that we ensure that education is shielded from its consequences. Again, we must unite in a common vision.

It is, in fact, crucial that third-level education is recognised in the midst of the crisis as the core protection our society has against the very worst of Brexit. Education brings knowledge creation where a vacuum of ideas would otherwise exist.

The student movement in Ireland, North and South, has stood firmly against Brexit, believing that it represents the very worst of public discourse. The scale of its consequences remain uncertain, and during the long negotiation that has followed the referendum of 2016, education has been regrettably absent from the debate.

While the initial March 29th deadline has been and gone and the Withdrawal Agreement looks increasingly unlikely to pass into law, USI believes that we should begin to examine the detail. This Position Paper seeks to do that.

Government must step up its activity to protect and enhance education in the face of this threat - otherwise, in the years to come, as a nation, we will regret our inaction.

Le meas, Síona Cahill Uachtarán

Jima Ghill

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A chara,

The feelings of shock and uncertainty since the referendum on Brexit have never subsided. As a Sabbatical Officer in Queen's University Belfast Students' Union at the time of the referendum campaign I remember the sense of deep loss and fear for our collective future as dawn broke on 24th June 2016. Three years on the political turmoil has worsened and the unanswered questions continue to multiply.

As an all-island movement we have focused our efforts on protecting the Good Friday Agreement and it's dividends for education, students, young people, and society. In USI we have raised the issues that threaten third-level education at An Taoiseach's Brexit Dialogue, to Michel Barnier directly, to the relevant Departments, and through a joint lobby effort of the European Commission and MEP's from across these islands.

As the clock ticks low on the Brexit timeline, despite the numerous deadline extensions, it is imperative that USI now lay out the potentially wide and deep consequences across the third-level landscape in Ireland, building on the work already done by our Northern peers in NUS-USI.

We know anecdotally that xenophobia is rising against our English and UK students. We know that international student numbers will rise, yet it seems unlikely that the support structures around them will simultaneously increase. We know that increased competition among institutions is occurring. And we know that the vital social, cultural, and economic fabric of our island is tearing apart.

Through this Position Paper the student movement is leading out on the consequences of Brexit. Government has been actively seeking to prevent a hard border and to protect our fragile peace, but USI now asks that Government and decision-makers work with the student movement to launch a much needed campaign to protect third-level education

It is time to act. Now is the time for students, staff, colleges, and Government to collaborate in the midst of uncertainty. This collaboration is crucial to protecting the one great leveller in Irish society - education.

In Unity,

Oisín Hassan
Deputy President & Vice President for Academic Affairs

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SOLIDARITY FROM NUS-USI



It is a matter of great pride for me, and for NUS-USI, that we work in partnership with USI and with NUS in a spirit of solidarity and cooperation. The agreement which brings together these three organisations pre-dates the Good Friday Agreement's own North-South and East-West structures and this indicates the absolute commitment NUS-USI has to cross-border cooperation and student mobility.

Brexit poses significant problems in relation to cross-border student mobility and the rights that people in the North hold as a result of the Good Friday Agreement. People did not work for peace only to see the progress made lost by those who seek to pull us out of the EU against Northern Ireland's will.

NUS-USI is resolute in our stance that we see Brexit stopped. We continue to robustly apply pressure on the UK to either withdraw article 50 or give the UK a People's Vote to have an opportunity to reject Brexit

The chaos and ambiguity caused by triggering Article 50 and taking the UK to the brink of a cliff-edge no-deal Brexit must be addressed as a matter of urgency. We need guarantees that students studying in higher or further education on a cross-border, or across these islands, do not face increased tuition fees as a result of Brexit. We also require a range of other guarantees around apprenticeships funded through the European Social Fund, recognition of qualifications, EU research funds, people's right to remain in the UK, and Erasmus+ in the event of the UK leaving the EU.

I strongly welcome the creation of this position paper from USI, and am confident it will help advance the aims of students and shine a light on the potentially disastrous impacts of Brexit upon education.

Olivia Potter-Hughes President of NUS-USI



Introduction

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) is the representative body of 374,000 students across the island of Ireland, and is an entirely student-led organisation. We are comprised of further and higher education member students' unions across the island, both North and South, and seek to protect and enhance education, the rights of students, and the ability of all to access third-level education.

USI has a Trilateral Agreement with NUS-USI (Northern Ireland) and NUS (United Kingdom), which was first negotiated in 1974, unifying the student movement at a time of strife and conflict across these islands.

This paper is prepared from an emergency policy motion to USI Congress in April 2019, after the initial March 29th Brexit date passed and a potential "crash" no-deal Brexit loomed on April 12th 2019. Since then, that date has also passed with a further extension granted to the United Kingdom.

At USI Congress 2019 student delegates developed this position paper in a collaborative break-out space. It now forms the backbone of USI efforts to navigate the crisis and threat that Brexit presents to Irish society and to third-level education on the island. However, it is not an exhaustive document and as Brexit continues to unfold USI will respond to emerging issues.

Executive Summary

Brexit has the potential to impact many facets of Irish life and society, including on issues of access to education. Government and decision-makers have been given much needed breathing space after the extension of Article 50. Even though the length of this extension is uncertain, it does provide an opportunity for a more in-depth consideration of the consequences for students.

- ° USI reaffirms the **commitment of the student movement to peace and prosperity**, to the protection of the Good Friday Agreement, and the **need to prevent a 'hard border'** on our island.
- ° USI calls for the creation of a **national Working Group on the impact of Brexit on third-level education**, and for institutions to set up their own local Working Groups. Students' Union representation is integral to all such groups.
- ° The rights and status of all living on our island must be protected, including the **right to dual citizenship, continued residency**, and **unimpeded cross-border travel**.
- ° Government must take action to reduce fees and increase Student Universal Support Ireland grant access in post-Brexit Ireland to protect access to education against the predicted rise in the cost of living.
- ° Government must seek solutions to **protect access to student and staff mobility**, protect or replace Erasmus+ opportunities, and improve its efforts on modern languages.
- ° Government must work with students, staff, and institutions to **monitor any loss of collaborative or research links** and the impact that this will have on teaching and learning.
- ° Government must ensure the access and rights of postgraduate students and workers are protected with the **introduction of a national PhD minimum stipend rate** that reflects the significant costs of living associated with research degrees.
- ° Meaningful action must be taken to **support international students** as numbers look set to rise rapidly, including financial support and legislative change.
- ° USI is **aware of rising levels of xenophobia in Ireland, including racism on and off campus** and a rise in negative rhetoric aimed at UK students. We will also work with Government to increase protections for ethnic minority students and to make Ireland a more welcoming place.



The Context for the Union of Students in Ireland

Since the referendum result was announced in June 2016 USI has sought to ensure that our sister organisation, NUS-USI, was supported in their efforts to mitigate the effects of Brexit on students in the North and in the border region, including supporting their call for a 'People's Vote'. The UK-EU Brexit negotiations concluded in a Withdrawal Agreement that sought to protect the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and prevent a hard border in Ireland, but after considerable debate in Westminster the Agreement was not accepted. In this context it is crucial that USI lay out the core issues that face third-level education in the Republic of Ireland . It is even more crucial that USI seeks to navigate those issues to protect and enhance the rights of students.

The prevention of a hard border and the protection of the Peace Process in Ireland is integral to the protection of education and students' rights cross border. Furthermore, it is clear that Brexit will have significant impact on the economic, social, and cultural fabric of society, across the island.

The impact of Brexit on education hasn't been at the forefront of negotiations, especially given the ongoing need to secure commitments and agreement against any form of 'hard border'. But now that Brexit has been potentially extended to 31st October 2019, it is imperative that Government, colleges, and the student movement now work together to identify consequences and work to mitigate them.

This Position Paper aims to set out the issues and ways in which USI can work to address them in the Republic of Ireland as Brexit and its impact unfolds.

The Context for NUS-USI

USI adheres to the stance set out in the *NUS-USI Strategy Paper on Brexit*, recognising that NUS-USI is an autonomous organisation of students in Northern Ireland and that USI has no right to infringe on the Trilateral Agreement and that autonomy.

The NUS-USI Strategy Paper sets out:

'If the UK leaves the EU, there is a possible creation of a 'hard border' between Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland, and this could have a significant impact upon trade and cross-border mobility.

A hard border could damage job opportunities as well as study opportunities, and could also diminish opportunities for cross-border co-operation and the potential for funding for projects of this nature in the academia and the student movement, for example.

The level of political instability that could be caused in the event of the UK leaving the EU will likely disadvantage students, because any instability could put political progress and devolution in NI in further jeopardy.

Despite the distinct political and geographical landscape, it may still be very difficult for Northern Ireland to successfully gain any kind of associate EU member status to avoid a hard border if the UK leaves the EU.'



NUS-USI set out it's objectives in the Strategy Paper as follows:

- ° We want guarantees to protect student and apprentice mobility cross-border on the island of Ireland;
- ° To protect the common travel area;
- ° EU citizens who are students or apprentices should in Northern Ireland and Great Britain must have the right to remain here;
- ° Continued access to EU funding on teaching and learning and EU student and academic mobility and exchange programmes;
- ° There must be no increases in fees or additional barrier put in place for students studying on a cross-border basis;
- ° All protections and rights within the 1998 Belfast Agreement must be retained.



- ° USI will continue to work with our sister organisations, NUS-USI and NUS UK, through the Trilateral Agreement, including the establishment of a Student Taskforce on Brexit.
- ° USI seeks the active inclusion of issues affecting third-level education in Irish Government Strategies and lobby efforts with all relevant decision-makers, including the UK Government and within the European Union.
- ° USI calls for the creation of a national Working Group on the impact of Brexit on third-level education, both Further and Higher, which should aim to coordinate approaches across institutions and regions.
- ° USI believes institutional Working Groups are crucial to explore the local impact of Brexit and feed up issues of concern to any national group. Students' Union representation must be central to these efforts.



The Impact on Third-Level Education

The consequences of Brexit on access to education are perilous, but the full impact cannot yet be known. It is key for USI, in solidarity with NUS and NUS-USI through the Trilateral Agreement, to navigate the fallout from Brexit in order to secure, protect, and enhance the rights of our students.

OBJECTIVE

PROTECTING HARD WON RIGHTS

"Currently there are 12,500 students travelling between Ireland and the UK annually"

USI is working closely with NUS-USI and NUS UK to ensure that residency and citizenship rights currently secured under the Good Friday Agreement are protected. Uncertainty remains on residency and citizenship status of many, notably in the DeSouza case. Currently there are 12,500 students travelling between Ireland and the UK annually, over 10% of academic staff in Irish HEIs are UK nationals, and 17% of staff in UK HEIs are EU nationals, including Irish citizens.

Government and decision-makers must recognise the role it is imperative they play to protect the right of access of staff to travel and work across borders. This is especially evident considering the high staff:student ratio in the Republic of Ireland, currently standing at 19.6 students to every staff member, which could rise further if the rights of staff are not enshrined post-Brexit.

ACTION

ALL-ISLAND RIGHTS

- ° USI is concerned about the potential erosion of the rights of residency and citizenship on the island particularly given the threat of increased border bureaucracy and checkpoints.
- ° USI calls on the Irish Government to lobby the UK Government to ensure that the status and livelihoods of students and staff travelling cross-border are not disrupted in any way.

OBJECTIVE

PROTECTING HIGHER EDUCATION

"The Republic of Ireland will have the highest tuition fees in the European Union post-Brexit, with the Student Contribution Charge standing at €3000."

The Republic of Ireland will have the highest tuition fees in the European Union post-Brexit, with the Student Contribution Charge standing at €3000. In February 2019 the Government's Brexit Omnibus Bill and subsequent amendments sought to protect the fee status of NI and UK students, and to ensure that students from the Republic studying in the UK still had access to SUSI grant support - this is welcome but more concrete assurances are needed for students registering post 2019.

Post-Brexit the cost of living is set to rise in the Republic, while the economy and employment is projected to suffer. In this context it is even more imperative that USI fights for publicly funded third-level education, the abolition of fees, and increased access to SUSI grants.



ACTION FEES AND GRANTS

- ° USI reiterates its call for publicly funded third-level education and the abolition of fees, recognising that access to education may be thwarted not only by mobility and cross-border travel, but also by a rapid rise in the cost of living post-Brexit.
- ° USI seeks assurances that the Irish Government will (at the very least) continue to protect the current fee status of students studying in institutions cross-border or in the UK, welcoming the legislative protections included in the Omnibus Bill.
- ° The Government should instigate an immediate review of the SUSI Grant system to hear directly from struggling students, reduce the grant adjacency rates, and increase grant rates and thresholds to much more adequately support students through education in an uncertain time.
- ° The impact of Brexit on postgraduate students and international students may be more acute, therefore multi-year fee certainty is crucial in this environment. Government must introduce legislative protections

OBJECTIVE PROTECTING MOBILITY ACROSS BORDERS

Cross border student travel amounts to 3000-4000 students each year, crossing the border in Ireland, in both directions. Many of these students travel cross-border daily on multiple occasions, not only moving between their home/accommodation and their college, but also to access public services and amenities that are taken for granted in daily life. The implication of a hard border will not only disturb and disrupt that seamless travel physically with potential checks and queues, but also with the introduction of red-tape and bureaucracy.

Of particular concern to USI is the impact on student rights and lived experiences, especially those in Further Education Colleges dotted round the border, on apprentices who work across borders as part of their education, and on students on placement who travel cross border regularly.

Student access to vital study abroad opportunities, including through the Erasmus+ programme, internships, and other funded mobility initiatives, will suffer both North and South. In the North there is a significant potential that access to Erasmus+ will be prohibited. In the South the number of students able to take up study abroad through the programme will potentially be devastated considering the high numbers of students who study on Erasmus in the UK itself, including in Northern Ireland.

Furthermore, the Department of Education and Skills has set out to prioritise modern languages in its Action Plan and in the Languages Connect Strategy, yet the provision of modern languages teaching in Ireland remains low. In the context of Brexit it is imperative that students in Ireland can learn modern languages in order to encourage more student mobility, recognising that lack of language skills creates a barrier to studying abroad.

Staff mobility programmes, including under Erasmus+ may also contract significantly under Brexit. Our efforts must also ensure that these funding streams remain in place. Staff mobility contributes directly to the quality of education in our colleges, at both undergraduate and post-graduate level, by contributing to the creation of new knowledge and capacities in teaching, learning and research.



ACTION

ENHANCING MOBILITY POST-BREXIT

- ° USI will continue to support NUS-USI to ensure that the UK stays in the Erasmus+ programme post-Brexit.
- ° The Irish Government and Irish HEIs must ensure that protections are in place for students currently in the Erasmus+ programme in the UK.
- ° An alternative mobility programme must be imagined in the event that Brexit results in a UK exit from the Erasmus+ programme. USI wishes to see the Department for Education and Skills act proactively on this matter to ensure that the UK and Ireland continue to be a destination for students when considering study abroad.
- ° The Department for Education and Skills must turn it's strategy on modern languages into action with investment in teaching, qualifications, and learning opportunities in order to create more avenues for student and staff mobility in Europe post-Brexit.
- ° The national Working Group USI has called for in this paper should seek input from experts on the potential implications of restricted cross-border mobility on students and staff.

OBJECTIVE

PROTECTING THE OUALITY OF EDUCATION

Linked to the mobility of staff and students is the impact of Brexit on research funding, institutional research structures and resources, and cross-border research cultures.

Research from the Royal Irish Academy Taskforce on Brexit found that collaborative links between Irish and UK partners amounted to a total of 19% of all collaborative links Irish institutions had under Horizon 2020

Furthermore, 79% of staff surveyed agreed that collaborative links with UK staff was important to their discipline. Cross border teaching arrangements, provision of programmes and courses, and collaborative research are crucial to ensuring the quality of education in Ireland. The fostering of research culture and supporting resourced research departments underwrites the quality of education from undergraduate through to postgraduate research level.

ACTION

TEACHING AND RESEARCH

- ° USI supports NUS-USI efforts to ensure that the UK remains in Horizon 2020.
- ° USI believes that the Department for Education and Skills needs to be proactive on the potential loss of research links and funding, and wishes to find ways to more actively engage and communicate with our members on the implications.
- ° The loss of links and funding is also directly connected to the provision of high quality teaching environments from undergraduate through to postgraduate. Therefore USI believes a closer monitoring by the Department and by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) of any loss in research capacity is required in order to protect access and student success.



OBJECTIVE PROTECTING OUR POSTGRADUATES

It must be noted that post-Brexit, Ireland will be the last EU member state that strictly classifies PhDs as students only.

Given USI's position on lobbying to move towards an employee or mixed employee-student classification, it's fundamental that as Brexit bites the Government, relevant agencies and institutions recognise the pressing need to protect and enhance the rights of PhD and research students.

ACTION

POSTGRADUATE CONDITIONS

- Open PhD students require the security of a national minimum stipend wage if Ireland is to protect access and the learning environment in Higher Education. USI will also support NUS-USI efforts to enhance access to studentships in the North.
- ° Government must recognise that Brexit is and has the potential to be a significant issue of workers rights, including for staff and for research postgraduates in our HEIs. USI will work proactively with Trade Unions to identify the consequences for workers and students in Ireland students are workers, and the rights of both are intertwined.
- ° International postgraduate students face particular barriers (discussed further below), especially worrying given the rapid rise in numbers at both taught and research level. This group should be considered for specific targeted action, engagement and support.

OBJECTIVE PROTECTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Internationalisation is a key strategic aim of the Government of Ireland and HEIs across Ireland.

USI has previously raised concerns around the 'recruitment' of international students while essential pastoral and academic supports have not been put in place, while also opposing the exploitation of international students as fee 'cash cows'. After Brexit was passed by referendum, international student applications and numbers began to fall in NI and in the UK, while in the Republic they began to rise rapidly. It is likely that that rapid increase will continue post-Brexit, with the Republic the only major anglophone nation left in the EU.



ACTION

A MORE WELCOMING IRELAND

- ° USI supports the swift passage of amendments to the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, including the provision of an International Education Mark (IEM) by the QQI. The IEM must create real and meaningful protection for students across third-level, acting as a student charter that ensures current supports are improved.
- ° Tailored financial and academic supports for international students must be created, and this must be led by the Department for Education and Skills, recognising that international students can face barriers throughout their time in Ireland. For example, the Fund for Students with Disabilities should also take account for international students.
- ° Visa and immigration barriers continue to exist for international students: USI is concerned these will be heightened in the event of Brexit. The Interdepartmental High-Level for International Education should spearhead a full review of the need for reform in visas and immigration.
- ° USI calls for strong assurances and clarity from Government on the growing issue of access to affordable international student health insurance.

OBJECTIVE

FIGHTING THE RISE OF XENOPHOBIA AND RACISM

Brexit occurred in the midst of debate marred in racism, xenophobia, and bigotry.

"Brexit occurred in the midst of debate marred in racism, xenophobia, and bigotry." USI is opposed to all forms of xenophobia and racism, and will campaign to ensure that Irish society remains welcoming and inclusive, with a culture of integration at its heart, particularly in the face of severely anti-refugee and anti-migrant language and sentiment which pervaded the Pre and Post Brexit discourse.

There is a worrying increase in the reporting of instances affecting both students and the public, of hate speech and violence.

This must be tackled head on through education as well as by making any acts of violence motivated by hatred or bias towards someone's perceived identity or background a hate crime.

Furthermore, given the politically strained relationship between Ireland and the UK, we must also ensure that as a student movement we challenge exclusion or xenophobia of our British and UK students both on campuses and off.

Our educational institutions should be leaders in diversity and integration of students from around the world, and should be responsive to the growing need for supports and institution-wide approaches which facilitate cultural and political differences in a respectful and accommodating environment.



ACTION

AN INCLUSIVE IRELAND

- ° USI will seek to combat racism and xenophobia throughout all of our work and at all levels, inclusive of event forums, student gatherings, citizenship campaigns and equality advocacy. Through our lobby efforts and media engagement, we aim to highlight and name increased instances of xenophobia, and educate the student population positively to end it.
- ° USI has registered over 90,000 students to vote since the referendum on marriage equality, so in the light of Brexit, will be actively seeking to educate, mobilise and empower students regarding their voting rights regardless of their citizenship.
- ° USI calls for hate crime legislation to be immediately enacted, which is inclusive of racism and xenophobia.

OBJECTIVE

FIGHTING THE MARKETISATION OF EDUCATION

USI is opposed to the marketisation and commodification of education. Brexit brings with it the threat of increased competition among our colleges at home and abroad, increased competition to protect research funding, and competition to 'recruit' international students.

ACTION

EDUCATION IS A PUBLIC GOOD

- ° Government should recognise third-level education as a public good. Rights should not be commodified, and students are not consumers. Brexit has the real potential to undermine the role of third-level education in Ireland.
- ° Government Strategies should not promote marketisation, and competitive funding calls should not be used to replace core funding.



Conclusion

In 1974, USI and NUS UK came together with Students' Unions in the North to set out a united and collective future for the student movement across these islands. That Bilateral Agreement subsequently flourished in to the Trilateral Agreement that ensured our Northern members had an autonomous space to fight oppression, social injustice, and to mobilise their students to fight for their rights.

The student movement and the rights of all people living across this island are now in serious danger. The architects of student unity in 1974 went on to build peace across the island, so it is imperative now that we stand as a collective to protect that peace and the rights we have won.

While Brexit remains uncertain and the full implications and consequences are unknown, the student movement must confidently strike out on behalf of our members to protect access to third-level education in Ireland.

USI, by working with Government and all relevant decision-makers, will ensure that the student voice remains at the forefront of building a progressive and inclusive society through access to education. We will not allow Brexit to wreck those efforts.

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USITA Union of Students in Ireland Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn





