



Strategy Paper on the British Exit of the European Union | Student Response | Congress 2019 |



Introduction

USI is the representative body of 374,000 students across the island of Ireland, and is a student led organisation. We are comprised of further and higher education member students' unions.

The USI has a Trilateral agreement with NUS-USI and NUS.

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. This Strategy aims to set out those 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.

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.

USI should work 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.

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 on Brexit 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.

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.

It is imperative that the student movement plays a role in protecting the right of access of staff to travel and work across borders. This is an especially evident need 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.

ACTIONS:

- Seek to set up a Brexit Taskforce of the Trilateral Agreement
- Any Brexit Taskforce should set out a lobby strategy for securing the rights of students and staff on residency and citizenship
- USI should include the implications of Brexit in its lobby efforts on publicly funded education, including on access to SUSI

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 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 implication on student rights and lived experiences, especially those in Further Education Colleges dotted round the border, on apprentices who work as across borders as part of their education, and on placement students who travel cross border.

Student mobility access, 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 postgraduate level, by contributing to the creation of new knowledge and capacities in teaching, learning and research.

ACTIONS:

- Work to support NUS-USI in lobbying the UK to remain in the Erasmus programme
- USI to advocate to the Irish Government that students currently in the programme are protected
- In the event that the UK cannot enter Erasmus in a no deal scenario, USI should seek to lobby alongside NUS and NUS-USI for an alternative mobility arrangement
- Lobby Government(s) to improve access to modern languages education, including increasing provision for qualifications in language teaching.

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.

It must also 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 imperative that as Brexit bites USI seeks to protect and enhance the rights of PhD and research students.

ACTIONS:

- USI should seek to support NUS-USI efforts to protect UK access to Horizon 2020 and other research collaborations
- USI should seek to communicate and engage with our members on the impact of loss of Horizon 2020 and other research links
- USI should ensure that the Department of Education and Skills (DES) and the Higher Education Authority to put in place the means to monitor any loss of research capacity at undergraduate or postgraduate level, and to put forward proposals to protect student access.
- USI must increase efforts to secure PhD national stipend rates, support NUS-USI efforts on studentships, and move towards employee and workers rights for PhD students
- USI should work with Trade Unions to support staff efforts in opposing the negative effects of Brexit on workers rights

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

ACTIONS:

- USI should increase efforts to secure increased international student rights and support the passage of the QQI International Education Mark in to law
- USI should lobby for increased financial and academic supports for international students, including (but not limited to) tailored supports in institutions and access to the Fund for Students with Disabilities



- USI should engage with international postgraduate students to understand the impact that increasing numbers postgraduate courses in HEIs, especially at taught level, has on student experience and rights
- USI should increase lobbying on visa and immigration barriers for international students, and represent the experiences of these students through the Departmental High-Level Group on International Education.
- USI should seek to raise issues and seek protections around access to services like insurance for international students.

Brexit occurred in the midst of debate marred in racism, xenophobia, and bigotry. USI is opposed to all forms of xenophobia and racism, and must ensure that it remains vigilant in Ireland to the anti-refugee and migrant language that gave rise to Brexit. Furthermore, given the strained relations between Ireland and the UK we must also ensure that as a movement we challenge exclusion or xenophobia of our British and UK students.

ACTIONS:

- USI should combat racism and xenophobia through its events, citizenship campaigns, and media engagement
- USI should raise the concerns and experiences of students who face xenophobia through its lobby efforts with Government and other bodies
- USI should seek to register non-national students to vote and ensure they are mobilised to vote in elections.

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

ACTIONS:

- USI should seek to include the implications of Brexit in its work on marketisation
- USI should lobby at all available opportunity to discuss the negative effects of marketisation, recognising that it is not widely discussed in the Republic



- USI should work with the European Students' Union to learn from their work against commodification across Europe

Conclusions

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 and to protect access to third-level education in Ireland.