

Insofar as anything can be predicted in the wider debate around Brexit, there are likely to be a number of important effects across the education sector as a result of the UK's departure from the EU.

Primary and post-primary education

Across primary and secondary education, the key issues are likely to revolve around:

- impact on the diverse composition of the Northern Ireland education system;
- implications for teacher education,
- restrictions on European funding; and
- mobility opportunities.

Diversity in the classroom

In broad terms, Brexit is likely to affect the opportunities for diversity in the classroom.

In recent research, 3.9% of pupils in Northern Ireland (13,300 pupils) were recorded as 'non-white'. That research also showed that approximately 4% of newcomer pupils (14,000 children) started to study in Northern Ireland schools with Polish and Lithuanian being the most common nationality.

It is expected that Brexit will lead to a sharp reduction in the number of these students in the Northern Ireland system and, as a result, will lead to a loss of pupils from diverse backgrounds, languages and cultures.

This, in turn, affects the opportunities for cultural awareness among local students and has implications for the sharing of good practice from other systems.

There are important consequences here for the Northern Ireland education system as it is more compact than that of our counterparts in the rest of the UK. There are presently 821 primary and 201 post-primary schools in Northern Ireland and presently approximately 93% of children attend separate schools based on religious affiliation. This would suggest that anything that may impact upon the ethnic (and potentially religious or cultural) make-up in a society, such as Brexit, would be quite acutely felt in Northern Ireland, given the concentration of schools locally.

Similarly, the issue of the impact on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland will also raise issues around cross-border education and, in particular, the impact for student mobility for students and their parents living in border areas. The numbers affected are generally quite small with approximately 400 pupils from Northern Ireland per year studying in primary or post-primary schools in the Republic of Ireland. There are, however, nearly four times more students from the Republic of Ireland studying in Northern Ireland.

Teacher education

Teacher education and supply here has long been regarded as focused around the Northern Ireland market with the capped admission numbers for teacher training places funded by the Department of Education.

This has made admission onto those courses in Northern Ireland highly competitive - the vast majority of applicants are from Northern Ireland. Brexit could reduce opportunities for diversity of cultural and linguistic backgrounds in the teaching profession.

While at present, there are few subject areas in Northern Ireland that are experiencing teacher shortages, the same cannot be said of some subject areas elsewhere in the UK, where the recruitment of international teachers has helped to alleviate problems in some subjects, thereby ensuring their continued viability in the curriculum.

In other words, there are subjects considered as vulnerable in Great Britain because of teacher shortages (such as modern languages and some STEM areas) and if those subjects do not have a regular supply of teachers, there is a risk to the sustainability of those areas. This has an implication for Northern Ireland schools given that many Northern Ireland schools use examination boards based in Britain, such as AQA and EDEXCEL, for the delivery of GCSE and AS and A2 level qualifications and there could be implications for the range of subjects that may be offered by those examination boards.

Funding

In terms of funding opportunities, this is potentially the area where the impact of Brexit could be most quantifiable. European funding has always provided an additional source of funds for education in NI through both the EU Structural Funds and EU Peace and Reconciliation Funds (Northern Ireland has received more than €1.3 billion since 1995).

A new programme (PEACE IV, 2014-2020) worth €229 million was officially launched on 14 January 2016, with a strong emphasis on investment targeted at children and young people. Within the 2014-2020 cycle of that funding stream, local government is currently providing matched funding (€41 million) for the benefit of schools in Northern Ireland. One area relates to capital development of schools, another is the use of EU funds for shared education projects that include shared campuses and contact programmes between schools that have played an important role in the development of post-conflict opportunities locally.

The ethos of shared education is well developed in Northern Ireland, recognised across the sector, politically and by parents as having an important, positive role to play in promoting community relations. However, there is still work to be done and a desire shared by many to see the opportunity for such educational provision to be further extended. If access to European funding is lost through Brexit, will the necessary resources be made available to advance such projects?

Mobility

In a related area, there are important implications for the UK's continued access to student and teacher mobility and exchange programmes, such as Comenius, ERASMUS and ERASMUS +.

These programmes provide students from primary to higher education with opportunities for funded study trips to countries throughout Europe and the amount of funding received by individual schools could be quite significant.

In some cases, funding over an 8-10 year period for staff and student mobility visits in one school was into six figures.

Access to these schemes may continue but there is no clarity on whether UK students will continue to receive funding to undertake these initiatives: the ERASMUS scheme in particular has seen over 200,000 UK students avail of study opportunities in Europe since the launch of the scheme in 1987.

Likewise, there are implications for inward mobility of students coming to the UK on study trips and whether students in EU countries will continue to receive funding to study in the UK.

This has potential implications for higher education, in particular, as many students on these study exchanges spend a minimum of three months in the UK. In 2015/16, there were over 127,000 EU students studying in UK Higher Education Institutions.

The potential loss of ERASMUS funding for those students to study in the UK is likely to have important financial implications for universities across the UK as well for associated industries such as retail, entertainment and hospitality providers in university towns and cities.

In the case of Northern Ireland, the consequences of this could be more acutely felt than in other parts of the UK, given the proximity to the Republic of Ireland; and most directly the university cities of Belfast and Derry~Londonderry may lose out to their counterpart cities across the border.

The potential loss of ERASMUS funding could also have direct consequences for many post-primary schools in Northern Ireland: presently, many schools avail of the British Council language assistantship programme that uses ERASMUS funding to support the provision of language teaching assistants. While the language assistantship scheme may continue, it may be on the basis of direct funding from schools or from the Department of Education if ERASMUS funding is lost. In the current financial situation faced by many schools, it is likely that this would create extra financial pressure locally.

Outward facing curriculum

Brexit may offer the potential for creating more outward facing opportunities for the curriculum. There are particular opportunities here for subject areas that most interface with international markets, such as business and languages in particular.

In the case of the latter, this may present interesting opportunities to halt the decline of the study of foreign languages in schools and potentially see a regrowth locally. Likewise, Brexit may present opportunities for increased Transatlantic partnerships in education and opportunities for bilateral agreements for study between the UK and the USA.

Higher education

Throughout the Brexit negotiations and the post-exit period, there are four priority areas for higher education:

- Research funding, research collaboration and research facilities
- Student fee, grants and loans
- Student mobility
- Staff mobility.

Research funding, research collaboration and research facilities

In all likelihood, European structural funding will be a casualty of the UK's withdrawal from the EU. This is particularly true of the European Regional Development Fund and the European Social Fund, which have done much to support regeneration in deprived areas, where many Higher Education Institutions, Ulster University included, see the prosperity and vibrancy of their surrounding region as central to their mission. The then Chancellor, Mr Hammond agreed to underwrite all letters of offer made between now and when Brexit negotiations are concluded, however there is still no guarantee as to how EU funding streams will be replaced in the future.

There will be no immediate change to the UK university sector's ability to participate in EU research and innovation programmes such as Horizon 2020. This has also been confirmed by the EU commissioner for research and innovation.

The long term future of UK participation in European science programmes will be decided as part of the UK's exit negotiations, and it is expected that these talks will take up to two years. The UK will remain an EU member during this time and as such will be entitled to participate in EU programmes and apply for EU research grants.

Clarification is however required as to whether UK Universities can continue to participate in EU research collaboration and funding programmes after the UK formally leaves the European Union.

Academic networks and collaborations are greatly enhanced through access to EU funding streams, allowing for projects to be scaled up in ways not possible at local or national level.

A key advantage for UK researchers working across the EU has been the ability to access scarce and expensive infrastructure and resources, enabling UK researchers to utilise facilities not otherwise available. The best large-scale research facilities are now located in the EU.

A prime example of this is the high level of international collaboration taking place at CERN, the European particle physics centre near Geneva. The key risk is that UK universities will no longer have access to these specialist facilities, reducing our competitiveness in attracting global research funding. Alternatively, UK universities could have to constantly renegotiate access to these large research facilities, which could also have a negative impact of the planning and delivery of research.

The world-leading research and innovation led by both of Northern Ireland's universities is significantly enhanced by access to funding, networks and facilities across the European Union. To continue to have the influence and impact that the current research funding and support structure that the EU currently facilitates, ways to protect and promote university research and innovation will be vital.

Student fee, grants and loans

There will be no immediate change to the tuition fees paid by current EU students attending UK universities. EU students are entitled to pay the same fees as UK students while the UK remains a member of the EU.

The fees that EU students are required to pay in the longer-term will depend on what is agreed as part of the UK's exit negotiations.

EU students attending universities in England, Wales and NI who are eligible under current rules to receive loans and grants from the Student Loans Company will continue to do so for the duration of courses they are currently enrolled on, or are about to start this coming year. Within the UK the total figure of EU nationals and EU domicile students accessing student finance in the academic year 2014/15 was 76,170, equating to 7% of the total.

We are currently awaiting confirmation on on-going arrangements for EU students at universities in Northern Ireland, when the UK leaves the EU, but it has been confirmed that EU nationals who are currently receiving student loans from Student Finance Northern Ireland, including those that started courses this autumn (2016/17 academic year) will continue to receive these loans and grants until they finish their course.

Student and student mobility

The longer-term implications for EU students who want to apply to study in the UK (i.e. from 2017–18 onwards) or academics wishing to work in the UK will depend on the outcome of negotiations and what kind of relationship the UK agrees with the EU.

Questions remain about the immigration status of existing EU students and staff following the UK's exit from the EU.

Higher Education Institutions, including Ulster University, believe it should be a priority for government to ensure that future academic and student mobility is not impeded by unnecessary bureaucracy regardless of the immigration status of EU nationals.

Engagement with, and exchange of staff and students, from other places enhances the knowledge, skills and culture of the wider university community and the higher education sector will want to see a post-exit scenario that continues to encourage and support such exchange.

Questions for round table discussions:

1. What steps can we take now to enhance and develop a more outward facing primary and post-primary curriculum? What would this curriculum look like?
2. Are there innovative ideas and opportunities we can explore now to alleviate the potential loss of funding for priority areas such as shared education?
3. What steps can we take to make Northern Ireland a more attractive proposition for higher education students and staff from the EU and beyond?