

# NUS-USI Strategy Paper on Brexit

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## Introduction

NUS-USI is the student movement in Northern Ireland, and is a student led organisation. We are comprised of further and higher education member students' unions which have a total of around 200,000 students.

## Executive Summary

### **NUS-USI objectives regarding the impact of Brexit**

- 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

## Northern Ireland context

If the UK leaves the EU there may be the creation of a hard border here between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and this could have a significant impact upon trade and cross-border mobility. This 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 if the UK leaves the EU could disadvantage students, as well as wider society, because any instability could put political progress and devolution here in 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, and this could be a cause of significant political instability here.

## Potential impact of UK leaving the EU on students here

As well in the rest of the UK, in Northern Ireland leaving the EU could deter many international students from enrolling here and could lead to institutions losing many lecturers and researchers, and possibly being unable to recruit the best staff globally. The Queen's University Belfast [EU Exit Institutional Position Paper](#) discussed "the increasing reliance on EU students, who comprise 14% of the total postgraduate research (PGR) population at the University." This underlines the importance of being able to continue to recruit students from the EU.

Leaving the EU could also mean significant EU research funding could be lost, and this could damage key innovation work and could leave institutions with financial shortfalls. The Northern Ireland Assembly document, [Brexit and Northern Ireland: A Reading List](#) has been useful in sourcing references in this and the next paragraph. The House of Commons Education Committee Report entitled [Exiting the EU: challenges and opportunities for higher education](#) said: "Research collaboration with Europe is essential to higher education. The Government should commit to Horizon 2020 and future research

frameworks to ensure ongoing research collaboration with the EU, but it would be prudent to develop a plan to match its funding domestically in a scenario in which this access fails.”

As regard Erasmus+, there is a funding commitment for the 2017 funding process; however, beyond that, UK involvement appears very unclear if the UK leaves the EU. Erasmus+ is crucial to student opportunities and government must ensure that the UK continues to participate in it even if the UK leaves the EU. A House of Commons briefing paper entitled [International and EU students in higher education in the UK FAQs](#) stated: “The UK’s participation in the Erasmus+ scheme post Brexit is uncertain and will depend on the outcome of exit negotiations with the EU.”

For Northern Ireland in particular any loss of international, EU or cross-border students, or EU-related research funding could see the finances of universities damaged very significantly. It is important that the university funding gap is addressed through public funding because to even publicly raise the idea of increasing tuition fees could act to make students want to leave Northern Ireland, particularly at a time when many students feel there is a distinct shortage of hope or opportunity here already.

A key issue which potentially makes Brexit more damaging for Northern Ireland than the rest of the UK is the uncertainty for students in regard to the border and cross-border mobility. A hard border could leave many students not knowing how much fees they have to pay, or if they will be considered international student and potentially require a visa.

Another significant factor for Northern Ireland within the UK context is that Northern Ireland will likely lose out on peace funding, regional development and the European social funding that it receives from the EU, if the UK leaves the EU. Much of this money can be spent on education, skills, student-related projects or infrastructure projects that can assist student mobility. To lose these funds could be very damaging for good relations work, skills, educational opportunities and community cohesion here.

## **Brexit, Rights and Identity in a Northern Ireland context**

An issue potentially distinct to Northern Ireland is the matter of identity, because the 1998 Belfast Agreement clearly makes reference to the European Union, and a key focus of this Agreement is around ensuring self-identity for people in Northern Ireland.

[The Belfast Agreement](#) contains the line: "Terms will be agreed between appropriate Assembly representatives and the Government of the United Kingdom to ensure effective coordination and input by Ministers to national policy-making, including on EU issues." This text may indicate some need for partnership on EU related issues. The Agreement, in discussing the North-South Ministerial Council, said: "The Council to consider the European Union dimension of relevant matters, including the implementation of EU policies and programmes and proposals under consideration in the EU framework. Arrangements to be made to ensure that the views of the Council are taken into account and represented appropriately at relevant EU meetings."

Tellingly, the Belfast Agreement also states, of the British and Irish Governments: "Wishing to develop still further the unique relationship between their peoples and the close co-operation between their countries as friendly neighbours and as partners in the European Union."

Possibly most importantly, the Belfast Agreement also states that the British and Irish Governments: "recognise the birthright of all the people of Northern Ireland to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both, as they may so choose, and accordingly confirm that their right to hold both British and Irish citizenship is accepted by both Governments and would not be affected by any future change in the status of Northern Ireland."

Brexit could lead many people to feel that their identity is being eroded, because a specific part of their identity in the Northern Ireland context, being an EU citizen, is being taken away if the UK leaves the EU. The impact that this may have on students and young people could be profound, because this along with potential negative economic conditions here could lead many more students and young people than do present to wish to leave Northern Ireland. Addressing the loss of Northern Ireland best talent is a key priority but Brexit could make this problem even more acute. That's why it's essential that government invests more in HE and FE as well as addressing the concerns raised in this document.

## Brexit, skills and the economy

The negative economic conditions that Brexit could create due to the potentially losing membership of the customs union and single market means that Northern Ireland economy could be placed in significant difficulty if it leaves the EU. This could manifest itself in job losses and pay decreases which would take place in a context which already sees Northern Ireland as the lowest wage economy in the UK.

To try and boost the economy in these difficult times, NUS-USI believes it is essential that government invests in skills and in students. This means more investment in FE and HE, tuition fees remaining frozen or being scrapped and inflationary increases being delivered for student support. In terms of attracting jobs here, if Northern Ireland loses the important selling point of EU membership, it must invest more in its unique selling point, its people and the skills that they have. Skills is arguably the main selling point that can address the very significant economic concerns regarding Northern Ireland in a post-Brexit landscape.

## NUS-USI Policy context

This section is on NUS-USI policy that informs the objectives that we have within this paper. Within NUS-USI policy file our policy states that: "In all lobbying on student fees, that the international student perspective is included, to highlight disparities and unfairness." It also discusses that NUS-USI: "Actively raise awareness of issues of international students in its campaigning; highlighting the need for all students to stand in solidarity with international students."

NUS-USI policy also says: "That the inclusion of international students in net migration will actively deny those students the chance to settle-in and contribute to our society after they have completed their studies. The contribution that these students make is immeasurable, and they should have the right to stay indefinitely upon completion of their studies."

Our policy also discusses "That all FE/HE colleges and universities should have a hardship fund, which is available to all students, not just ones that live in Northern Ireland. These hardship funds are for people who are struggling to pay for their loans and these are funded by the individual college/universities and so are not Government money. Conference also resolves that NUS-USI should campaign for the equality of Irish students

within Northern Ireland and that they should be able to apply for all loans that are available to Northern Irish students.”

## Conclusions and objectives

It is extremely important that decision-makers listen to and act on the concerns of sector stakeholders and experts in their field regarding the impact that the UK leaving the EU could have upon their sector and wider society. Leaving the EU could have an extremely detrimental impact upon further and higher education sector, as well as upon students here, which in turn could significant damage the economy.

Northern Ireland needs its students and young people to believe that they have opportunity and a positive future in Northern Ireland. If increased investment is not provided for FE, HE and students, it is almost certain that more students than any time in the past 20 years will leave Northern Ireland, and many may not come back.

Through addressing the right to remain in the UK, student mobility concerns, fee concerns, worries regarding rights and research funding worries, government can go a long way to showing students that they can have a bright future in Northern Ireland.

Highlighting the potential economic instability that leaving the EU could create, and how our objectives could protect the economy through skills is likely to help deliver solutions that could address potential challenges.

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